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Throughout his career, he has taught creative writing, acting, languages, philosophy, and the humanities in India, the United States, the United Kingdom, Portugal, Colombia, Kyrgyzstan, and Mexico.

In 2014, he was recognized by the Presidency of Colombia as one of the 100 Most Influential Colombians in the World.

In the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse, Marco Saint-André and his wife, Anaïs, leave the comfort of Western Europe to begin a new life in Kyrgyzstan, accepting positions at the American University of Kyrgyzstan. What begins as an academic adventure soon becomes an unexpected confrontation with corruption, political intrigue, cultural conflict, and the enduring legacy of totalitarianism.

As they travel across the mountains, bazaars, and ancient cities of Central Asia, they encounter diplomats, journalists, professors, students, and political figures whose lives reveal the hopes and contradictions of a nation searching for its identity. Amid anonymous threats, assassination attempts, and institutional persecution, Marco discovers that the greatest battle is not for professional success, but for the preservation of one's integrity.

Blending political drama, travel narrative, philosophical reflection, and an enduring love story, *A Kyrgyzstan Spring* explores the moral choices that shape both individuals and societies. Moving from Manchester to Bishkek, from the shores of Lake Issyk-Kul to London, the novel examines how private acts of conscience can unexpectedly influence the course of history.

Rich in historical insight and cultural observation, this is a story of courage, conviction, and the enduring power of truth in a world where compromise often seems the easier path.

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The Travels of Marco Saint-André





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André



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Your career will be arduous. I see in you something that offends the common crowd. Jealousy and slander will pursue you. Wherever Providence may place you, your companions will never see you without hating you; and if they pretend to love you, it will only be to betray you more surely. There is but one remedy for this: turn only to God, who has given you, to punish your presumption, this necessity of being hated. Let your conduct be pure; that is the only refuge I can see for you. If you hold fast to the truth with invincible resolve, sooner or later your enemies will be put to shame.

— Stendhal

His bitter exile and the courage he displayed,
I would not trade for the happiest state in the world.

— Michelangelo



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Preface

A Kyrgyzstan Spring opens the door to a subject seldom explored in contemporary fiction: integrity. Not as an abstract virtue, but as a lived experience, tested under pressure and capable of influencing the course of history. Within these pages, private decisions gradually intersect with public events, illustrating how acts of conscience may produce consequences far beyond those who first undertake them.

Set in Central Asia at the beginning of the twenty-first century, it follows Marco Saint-André and Anaïs as they leave behind the familiarity of Western Europe to begin a new life in Kyrgyzstan, a young nation still negotiating the legacy of the Soviet Union while searching for its own future.

What begins as an academic appointment gradually unfolds into something far more complex. Snow-covered cities, ancient bazaars, mountain landscapes, and multicultural classrooms provide the setting for encounters that challenge the protagonists' convictions and reshape their understanding of history, politics, and human nature. Through these experiences, private decisions unexpectedly intersect with broader historical currents, illustrating how individual choices can reverberate far beyond the lives of those who make them.

Although grounded in the political and cultural realities of post-Soviet Central Asia, the novel ultimately speaks to universal concerns. At its heart lies the question of how conscience survives within institutions where conformity, fear, and personal ambition often prevail. Rather than offering simple moral certainties, the narrative explores the difficult balance between integrity, prudence, loyalty, and truth.

The relationship between Marco and Anaïs

provides the emotional center of the story. Together they confront cultural differences, institutional pressures, personal dangers, and unexpected moments of grace. Their partnership gives the novel its emotional continuity, reminding the reader that love and mutual trust are often tested most profoundly when familiar certainties disappear.

The cast of characters reflects the diversity of a society in transition. Professors, students, diplomats, journalists, and public officials embody different responses to a rapidly changing world, where the collapse of one political system has not yet produced a stable replacement. Their interactions reveal the complexity of a country shaped by competing traditions, competing identities, and competing visions of the future.

The novel moves naturally between travel narrative, political drama, philosophical reflection, and personal memoir. Historical events coexist with intimate conversations, while moments of danger alternate with scenes of quiet contemplation. Throughout, the landscapes of Central Asia become more than a backdrop; they mirror the intellectual and spiritual journey undertaken by the protagonists themselves.

Readers will encounter questions that extend beyond the particular circumstances of Kyrgyzstan: the nature of justice, the cost of honesty, the responsibilities of intellectual freedom, the meaning of cultural identity, and the enduring tension between individual conscience and institutional power. These themes emerge through lived experience rather than abstract argument, allowing the narrative to remain firmly rooted in the lives of its characters.

From the former headquarters of the Soviet KGB to the closing pages in London, *A Kyrgyzstan Spring* traces a journey across countries, languages, cultures, and beliefs. In doing so, it suggests that the greatest frontiers are not

geographical but moral, and that the most enduring forms of resistance often begin with the quiet determination to remain faithful to one's convictions.

Leyla Margarita Tobías Buelvas
Sincelejo, May 2026



In your chambers in Geneva, you will no longer remember our ride through the gorges of Ala-Archa, nor the gentle rocking of the waves of Lake Issyk-Kul playing at our feet, although in that land adorned with Bolsheviks, princesses, dragons, and Tatars, we crossed abysses together and forged the revolutions yet to come.

We were ambassadors of progressivism in kingdoms that communism once believed it would possess forever: the ones destined to shake the house of cards of an entrenched bureaucracy. And if I fought from the island of your embrace, it was because you made my body your fortress, and within our mutual devotion we buried titans and gorgons alike.

Together we also arrived at a rural school in Osh, where students and teachers welcomed us with standing ovations for sharing in their humanity. We survived the last Stalinist persecution, which ultimately failed at your feet; we quietly uncovered murderers, faced assassination attempts on runaway mares, beside the Opera House, and at a ski resort. We contained the blaze that consumed our apartment, and spun helplessly inside a car as it skidded along the mountain ravines outside Osh.

Many years later, among the ruins of the Tamil Empire at Mahabalipuram, I learned the ancient art of splitting stone with wooden wedges. Centuries before the rise of Greek civilization, the Dravidians traded with Egypt, where Pharaoh's laborers drilled small holes in a straight line around massive rocks. Those holes were then filled with tiny acacia wedges, which the women watered daily beneath the scorching sun. As the wood expanded, the rock gradually cracked. A carefully carved groove guided the force of gravity until, after two or three years, the granite finally split in two, like an orange cleaved by a ray of sunlight.

For if we survived and prevailed, it was because the

wedges we endured continued to expand through the years; yet our union, consecrated beneath the ethereal arches of Córdoba, eventually developed fractures that neither of us any longer wished to mend.



1. A Stalinist Trial

After receiving my private German lesson with little concentration, I printed out Zernebog's letter—the very one they were now using to accuse me—and made my way with Anaïs to the hall where I would be tried for the crime of unjustly accusing a student of bribery.

Anaïs took my arm, as she always did. Her slender figure, raised on high heels and wrapped in the fur coat I had bought her in Dordoi, radiated a strange resolve, at odds with the gravity of the moment.

“On ne fait rien de grand sans de grands hommes, et ceux-ci le sont pour l'avoir voulu,” she said, when I asked whether I had compromised myself by denouncing to my students certain practices that, as we all knew, governed the life of the University.

The summons had arrived minutes earlier, after my meeting with Rector Gulmat; the university appeals committee had decided to convene me with a promptness that left no room for doubt: this was not a clarification, but a cunning trial with a sentence already written.

Out of the corner of my eye I could feel the stares of the students, staff, and faculty of the American University of Kyrgyzstan; I wondered how many times they had witnessed a similar scene, in those same corridors, barely twenty years earlier, when the KGB led to interrogation those accused of imposing bourgeois ideas on the infallible socialist system of the Soviet Union.

We reached a corridor where Saikal, the cat-eyed secretary of the Faculty of Communications, told us to sit.

“I thought they were expecting us,” I protested.

Saikal gave me a compassionate smile and pressed her palms to her chest, in a gesture of dutiful kindness. I exchanged a knowing look with Anaïs; we both knew she

was happily exhausted.

"Her boyfriend arrived from Holland yesterday morning," Anaïs had told me the evening before. "Saikal picked him up at the airport, and they made love all day in one of the hotels near the University."

"Distance sharpens desire," I remarked absently.

"Actually, they'd never met before," Anaïs replied. "They met online barely two weeks ago."

"So she already knows that for him this will be just a vacation fling."

"She'll try to get him to leave her pregnant," Anaïs said. "At least that's what she told me."

Anaïs perceived her surroundings directly. Her judgments formed quickly and rested on a firm set of behavioral lines that imposed themselves over appearances. Where I reflected, discerning sharply between lies and truth, she intuited on a spiritual plane. That difference set its own rhythm in our decisions and shaped the way we confronted prickly situations.

I reflected then on the inequalities of the globalized era, which favored the natives of countries that granted, through a series of draconian mechanisms, salaries up to twenty times higher than what a citizen of the once-colonized countries could earn.

"Почему ты такой грустный?" a voice asked behind my back.

I turned and saw Magda, the professor, settling into her chair in front of her computer keyboard.

"I'm not sad," I answered, annoyed. "Is there anyone here who is?"

"A certain victim of her own idea of virtue."

Magda smiled at me with forced compassion.

Anaïs asked me in French whether Magda was provoking me, and when I translated Magda's question, she stroked my cheek, signaling that I should not argue with her further, that this was a treacherous strategy

devised by Dr. Anton Utkin, dean of the Faculty of Psychology, to intimidate me. I thought of Utkin's stout figure, smoking his pipe outside the University gates, dressed in an immaculate grey wool suit, waistcoat, silk scarf, and black tie over a starched white silk shirt. His penetrating gaze and heavy breathing foretold a damning verdict, one that congealed the moment his deep, resonant voice rang out, devoid of any smile. His face was even more intimidating, framed by thick grey hair, a beard, and bushy moustaches that evoked Karl Marx. As he passed, one could normally hear murmurs of praise and approval.

On one occasion I asked Narguiza about the reasons for his popularity, and she explained that he was a distinguished exponent of Soviet psychology.

Narguiza spoke with a calm that seemed foreign to the tensions around her. Small in figure, almost fragile in her gestures, her presence conveyed a constant delicacy, sustained by a measured smile and a courtesy without cracks. There was no urgency or emphasis in her: every word found its place without imposing itself. Throughout my stay I always found her that way—discreet, reserved, as though her role consisted of listening rather than intervening, keeping to herself any judgment about what was happening around her.

"Was he in charge of extracting confessions from the unfortunate counterrevolutionaries?" I joked, before the pale face of my interlocutor, who clumsily confessed that, while Dr. Utkin had indeed been a KGB advisor in Frunze (today Bishkek), his main distinctions were in the treatment of paranoia.

Anaïs would later explain to me that the question had not been innocent, for it did not address a manifest sadness, but sought to install one. In a certain Soviet psychological tradition, formed between Pavlov's reflexology, Vygotsky's cultural-historical theory, and Leontiev's activity theory, the individual could be read through his responses, his adaptation to his surroundings,

and his place within a system of relations. If the question were repeated enough—"why are you sad?"—it ceased to be a question and became a clinical directive: the first step toward attributing to me a melancholy I did not feel, a depression I did not suffer, an inclination toward collapse that others sought to confirm.

Its intent, Anaïs would add, was to produce that state through social means: isolating, unsettling, marking differences until the pressure of the environment did the work on its own. What began as a suggestion could become experience, and experience, symptom. That logic, sustained over time, took the form of a continuous test, an atmosphere in which every gesture was read, every silence interpreted.

She spoke with the authority of one who had read psychology out of her own vocation. Her mother had forbidden her from studying it formally, but had not kept her from forming herself in it; and in that maneuver she recognized an attempt at classification.

I was not sad: they wanted sadness to come to me as a prelude to suicide. With the passing months, that pressure would become persistent, a kind of undertone accompanying every day, reawakening in me a sense of helplessness that came not from my own spirit, but from the environment inherited from socialist communism.

While we waited for further instructions from Saikal, I reread the letter on which my defense rested:

"I deeply regret this misunderstanding. The students in my group and Arkadina Morozov have told me that you understood my comments about private lessons as a bribe. Please allow me to explain what I meant during our conversation. There is a legal channel at our University for obtaining private lessons, in which the student pays the University the salary calculated for a specific course and studies the course independently with the professor.

"I am currently taking a beginner's Kyrgyz

language course in the same way. So, after you told me that we had only four weeks left to finish the semester, and since I would not be able to meet the minimum requirements to pass the course, I thought it best to study the missing classes with you over the winter.

"Please believe that I would never consider a bribe under such circumstances. In fact, I grew up in an intelligent family, with high moral and ethical values, and would never consider anything of the sort. I have also lived and studied in America and Europe for more than five years, and I know how harmful and unnecessary bribes can be. What's more, the American University of Kyrgyzstan has always been known as the most intolerant of corruption in Central Asia, with the highest standards of academic honesty. I even doubt that thoughts of bribery ever cross the minds of our students and professors. I value my reputation; my only flaw is missing class. Over four years at this University I have worked to build up my name. Together with an American professor I organized the student newspaper, of which I have been editor for over a year; I was president of the AKA television company, where we broadcast the University's first programs; I have worked with the Ministry of Education, with the telecommunications company BIT, and with several television stations. I certainly would not ruin my work in an instant over a bribe offer, least of all with a foreign professor.

"We come from countries that leave much to be desired when it comes to governmental corruption. We know what a bribe is and how it can damage someone's career—or, to be honest, improve it. But I understand that you are a professor with SEP, and as such, above all, you would never accept a bribe.

"Please understand that I work as a television journalist and that I am building a career with my own ethical and moral values, and as such I would never offer a bribe to anyone.

“Zernebog Tripov”

I gathered together the absurd, revealing statements that had brought me to this trial, a mimicry of Stalinist condemnations. “Accused of attempting to accuse a student of bribery”—a reference to my casual conversation with the rector, who boasted of being incorruptible in a nation where, as the Cuban José had already told me, every professor was said to hold a fortune thanks to the bribes that influential students offered to pass their courses.

“My neighbors think I’m rich,” he had told me. “They know I teach Spanish at several universities, and they assume I get bonuses from wealthy students who don’t study.”

That trade in grades explained, moreover, the abundance of university degrees held by professionals like Darixa, who at twenty-nine already held three diplomas—in her case, in Political Studies, Nuclear Physics, and Psychology...

Darixa concentrated in her figure several layers of the local order. In her manner there coexisted Slavic pride, American aspiration, and the administrative discipline inherited from the Soviet system. Her way of addressing others organized space according to precise hierarchies, exercised with ease. In her office, amid documents and measured gestures, one sensed a form of authority that needed no explanation, because it manifested itself in every decision.

Already at the induction we had at a tranquil resort by Lake Issyk-Kul, Jeff Bennett had asked the audience how we ought to react to an offer of a bribe. I tried to speak up, but I realized his question was rhetorical, since he immediately changed the subject to ramble about the academic calendar.

I greeted Narguiza, the diminutive SEP finance secretary, who, with a smile, led us to the old KGB

interrogation chamber, where we found Magda, Annika—the University president’s girlfriend—and four taciturn men; among them I recognized Leo, one of my brightest students, and one whom, along with Laurica, I held in the highest regard. What was most surprising and, of course, most outrageous, was to see him there, in the position of judge of a supposed crime that I plainly had not committed, serving also as a witness against me; it was clear his presence answered to an imposition, and that they took on that role with the discipline of one following orders, like a soldier who, in the middle of a civil war, is forced to raise his hand against his own.

Leo was tall, blond, blue-eyed, with sharp, almost rigid features that contrasted with the clarity of his thinking; he was one of the students most often consulted by his classmates, and in his interventions one could sense an orderly intelligence, capable of quickly unraveling the most complex problems. Before my arrival, a scandal had shaken the University; Leo had had a homosexual affair with Valentino Smith, the American professor I was replacing. The relationship had been severely rejected by the authorities, in an environment that still carried the reflexes of a tradition in which homosexuality had been criminalized, punished with prison sentences, and used as an instrument of social control, whose trace persisted beyond the system that had instituted it; the professor had to leave the country under tense circumstances, while Leo remained at the institution, shielded by an interpretation that, owing to his status as a student and his youth, placed him as the vulnerable party in the relationship, especially given that his lover was twelve years his senior.

Laurica, for her part, possessed a presence of another nature; her intelligence unfolded with an elegance that needed no assertion, and in her manner of speaking there was a cadence that evoked Rodin’s young lover, Camille Claudel: a slender figure, of concentrated gestures, in which sensitivity and form seemed to spring from the

same impulse; in her, beauty resided in the articulation of her ideas, in the way each remark opened a space of attention.

There was also Oleg, a young man with the chin of a French fin-de-siècle painter, black-haired and bearded, the most respected English-Russian translator at the University, who had somehow become the University's unofficial jester by virtue of his aggressive local sense of humor; Oleg moved in a register all his own, and his command of language allowed him to intervene in discourse with precision, modulating meaning and extending its reach; in his manner of translating one sensed an active intelligence, one that reconfigured words in the very act of uttering them.

During the University's academic year opening ceremony, Oleg was simultaneously translating President Daniel Weiler's welcome speech when, after nearly twenty minutes of dutiful verbiage, he crossed his arms and refused to translate another sentence, until the president asked whether he didn't understand him, to which Oleg replied that he was waiting to hear a sentence that would not put the audience to sleep.

The impertinence was cheered by the crowd of students, far more interested in whispering about the dance the organizers had promised for the end of the evening, and by President Weiler himself, who admitted that his speech did not reflect the celebratory mood of the start of the school year and, setting it aside, improvised a series of jocular anecdotes about his first two years as University president.

In that context he introduced his second wife, a young Kyrgyz woman of Scandinavian appearance, whom he invited up to the stage. He had left for her his American wife, his college sweetheart, the woman who had stood by him from the beginning and helped build his fortune and his position, and whom, once he was established, he had

set aside from his life.

The gesture was met with shrieks and applause that he, judging by his broad smile, took as a sign of approval, and that both Anaïs and I read as manifest disapproval.

"We have summoned you to answer some important questions," whispered a pale, middle-aged man with short hair, Prussian moustaches, and raccoon eyes. "My name is Dr. Popov, and I am dean of the Faculty of Architecture."

"May we sit down?" I asked.

"As you prefer," Popov answered curtly.

I took a seat, wondering whether I should point out the absurdity of that trial. Questions formed quickly in my mind: was there another committee that handled people unjustly accused of having attempted to accuse someone? I had mentioned the matter to the University's rector as a courtesy, in a social gathering, making clear that my aim was not to accuse Zernebog but to keep her informed of what had happened. I inferred that those present chiefly wanted to avenge the humiliation I had inflicted a few days earlier on Arkadina and Zernebog in the office of Annula, the Indian director of SEP, when, by analyzing their own words, I had exposed their secret alliance. Or was it a stern warning meant to keep me from asking further questions about the bribery practices at a University that survived thanks to donations from the U.S. State Department—donations that would cease the moment those criminal practices became public?

Every day I received anonymous calls at my apartment, in which laughter and voices calling my name could be heard. I had, in fact, already recognized the voices of several of my students, but I refrained from reporting them, certain they would deny their guilt only to immediately accuse me of slander. The most frequent voice was Irina's, a skinny student with short red hair, a round face, and a mischievous smile, who had boasted in the University newspaper that she could achieve anything in

life thanks to her perfect command of English, her sculpted body, and her boldness with men.

In the third of her anonymous calls, Irina had asked me whether my wife knew about my affair with Gretchen, my colleague and German professor in the Department of Political Science.

"Slander!" I had replied, recalling that on two occasions I had held conversations of nearly an hour with Gretchen in the University hallways.

"But you like it," Irina had replied, laughing.

I had refrained from hanging up, so as not to prove her right; Gretchen did attract me, in fact, more for her German than for her beauty or her intellect. To onlookers in a hostile environment, it was not hard to assume that two young foreigners who talked for hours were drawn to each other. They would imagine our sweating bodies in an orgasm that in the end would leave us with the bitter aftertaste of misunderstanding. Gretchen was as obsessed with Arabic as I was with Latin, and her Catholicism kept her from taking married lovers.

"Just cut the crap, Irina!" I exclaimed.

Irina hung up immediately; from then on she watched me from her desk with insistence. On one occasion she opened her legs and I noticed she was not wearing underwear.

Anaïs, in turn, had been harassed in one of her classes by Oleg, whom everyone at the University considered an Adonis. His classmates in the Statistics course applauded his flattery, but Anaïs cut them off at once:

"Don't you know yet what sexual harassment is?" she snapped at them. "It's not only punished from professor to student—it also goes from student to professor."

The class fell into a tense silence, eyes full of fear.

"This time I'll let it go," she added, "but if it

happens again, I'll report it immediately to the University president's office."

Days later, on the eve of my thirty-fourth birthday, while clearing away the breakfast dishes, Anaïs received another call in which a crowd laughed in unison.

"Gretchen!" several voices shouted in chorus. "Gretchen!"

"They want to make you jealous," I told Anaïs.

"They're telling me you were talking with her for almost two hours..."

"And they'll tell you I had an affair with her," I sighed, rinsing a pot. "Just because we talked in a hallway!"

I remembered the barren speculations of the inhabitants of Vetusta, the city of Leopoldo Alas "Clarín" in his novel *La Regenta*, after a bishop confessed a married woman for several hours: certain devout ladies and pious gentlemen, I recalled, amused themselves keeping track of who came and went from the cathedral's chapels, who confessed often, who neglected to, how long the confessions lasted—gossip of which their enemies took full advantage.

"They're wasting their time," Anaïs murmured, hanging up the receiver. "I know she's your type, but I also know you love me."

Nights later, after the first snowfall, we woke up shivering in the middle of the night.

"The heating isn't working," I said after getting up and checking the radiators.

"There's a power failure," Anaïs replied, trying to switch on her lamp.

"And yet," I answered cheerfully, "the city lights still shine on us."

That November night we slept in each other's arms, wrapped in several dusty curtains we used as a bedspread. The next morning I discovered that the electrical wires in our apartment had been cut; someone had slipped into the building furtively around midnight.

"You could have frozen to death," José told us days later. "It happens often at the start of winter."

"I've been told there's a local heating system," I said. "When does it start operating?"

"From November 27th," he told me, "when the temperature drops to minus 8 degrees Celsius."

Indigestion, he added, was also another cause of death around that time in the countries of the former Soviet Union.

"It's the pork the Slavic diaspora eats," was the resigned explanation the Kyrgyz gave me when I mentioned it. "Centuries ago our nation was decimated for eating pork—a punishment from Allah that persuaded us to convert to the Muslim faith."

No one, whether out of some ancestral fear or the impunity prevailing since Stalinism, dared to suggest the possibility of poisoning.

"Here people simply die," was Saikal's comment when I asked her whose portrait it was—that of the mature woman hanging in the Faculty of Communications office. "Four years ago my Spanish professor left our class forever because of a roasted chicken they served her in the University cafeteria; a few months ago this woman, a former dean of the Faculty of Communications, died after eating a lamb stew."

"Are you sure it was poisoning?" Anaïs asked Marcello days later, at a gathering at our home.

"It's not certain," Marcello said, shaking his head. "As it is, earning barely five dollars a month, it's no exaggeration to say the doctors here are among the least reliable in the world. Autopsies, for that matter, aren't performed in Bishkek; when they're needed, the bodies have to be sent to Moscow."

The telephone threats and the attempt of a car to run me down near the Opera Theater kept me from replying to Saikal; I chose to stay silent. Anaïs and Narguiza

had already taken their seats behind me. Then I met a pair of eyes burning with fury: a bald, wrinkled, thin man in a black wool suit, scrutinizing me, but instead of concealing his impertinence, confronting me with contempt.

Господин Дементьев, I thought.

Several professors had already warned me of his bad reputation; it was rumored that, as a history professor across all majors, Dementiev was the go-between for bribes passing from the student body to the faculty, and, according to my Czech friend Marcello Novák, he was the only one able to alter final grades in the computer system, thanks to his closeness with Rector Gulmat. I kept that information to myself with caution, already aware that false rumors reached my ears in order to lead me into slander.

Marcello was tall, blond, curly-haired, and blue-eyed, with that carefree look of young men who, like the American hippies of the sixties, seem to have inherited the world without trying. His presence commanded attention effortlessly: nearly two meters tall, an athletic build, an ease of manner that adapted itself to Kyrgyzstan's social circles. He had grown up in a privileged family, connected to sports, and carried with him the honesty of someone who has always had his place secured.

From the start he had been open with me. In an environment where everything filtered through rumor and silence, it was he who told me, frankly, about the conversations woven behind my back. His friendliness answered to an initial affinity, to a form of recognition I took for respect.

Over time, that closeness faded. Marcello quickly understood that his position within that order was different from mine. He was one of them: accepted, valued, protected. I occupied an uncomfortable place, exposed, bound to grate against the system. His withdrawal happened with the same naturalness with which someone privileged stops accompanying one who cannot keep his pace.

He learned Russian with superhuman speed, and in a short time became the best student in the class. That ease confirmed what his presence already suggested: Marcello moved with ease in any environment and always found a way to fit into it.

"I am the translator," Oleg said with an icy air, and, pointing to a silver-haired Russian in his sixties, added, "and this is Professor Dementiev, secretary of this trial against you on behalf of the American University of Kyrgyzstan."

I faced, with an impatient sigh, the presumed procurer and grade trafficker.

"Might I know the nature of the accusation against me?" were my opening words.

"Names," said Dementiev, holding his pen over a notebook.

I looked at Anaïs in disbelief; I had already read that Soviet trials were nothing but theatrical performances, in which each member played a part according to a preestablished script. My actor's vocation rose to the surface: how many people of my generation would ever have the chance to be victims of a Stalinist trial and live to tell of it?

"You already know," I replied, settling back into my chair.

"Answer!" was the cold retort of the history professor.

I was tempted to walk out of the room, to show my contempt for that farce, a reminiscence of what had been the victimizing empire of the Soviets. I did not doubt those who whispered that the former KGB spies who had swarmed Frunze had, for the most part—thanks to their family ties—obtained the teaching posts at the newly founded University of Kyrgyzstan, for which the central government had ceded the building that had once been the feared main headquarters of the KGB, adjoining the

Presidential Palace. Was it not only natural that those who had worked in that building as bureaucrats should remain there, now serving as professors? Still, I considered what might happen if I scorned their elaborate bureaucracy: would they condemn me in absentia and expel me from the University? I sensed, with unease, that my life and Anaïs's were also at stake, which kept me from acting with arrogance. Hoping to smooth things over, I decided to carry on with the farce.

"Marco Noël," I answered.

"Surname."

"Saint-André Ferreira Afanador Ríos," I said, invoking the old Hispanic custom of citing up to four generations.

A murmur of indignation ran through the room.

"We will note down Saint-André," Dementiev pronounced, now installed as judge of that comedy, and, after asking for and writing down my address and telephone number, he inquired about my nationality.

"French," I answered.

"Aren't you Colombian?" Popov barked.

"Colombia has no diplomatic representation in Bishkek," I replied, "and, since I hold dual nationality, it should be recorded that I am French."

"A Frenchman who looks like a Turk?" Oleg scoffed.

The judges of that sanhedrin laughed until tears sprang from their eyes. Only Anaïs and Narguiza remained silent, watching me sidelong. On the day I had first arrived at the Faculty of Communications, Saikal too had looked me up and down and asked whether I had come to drop off some material on behalf of the Turkish University. When I told her who I was, she said there must be some mistake, that they were expecting a Portuguese professor who taught at the University of Manchester.

"Before working in England I lived in Portugal," I said, "and before that, in France and the United States, but

I am originally from Colombia.”

“We used to feed you people,” she told me, her lips pressed thin.

“And now, as you can see, you people live off the scholarships the United States gives you,” I replied, not daring to dispute her claim.

It was true that, during the Cold War, thousands of Colombians had traveled on scholarships to the various states of the Soviet Union, among which Kyrgyzstan stood out—one of the most sophisticated language centers in the world, responsible for educating one of the most feared terrorists in United States history: Tamerlan Tsarnaev.

I remained upright, remembering the stoicism of Benjamin Franklin when he was insulted and humiliated by dozens of members of His Majesty King George III’s Privy Council.

“Place of work?” Dementiev asked, wiping his tears with a handkerchief. “Forgive us, but all the French people who have visited us have been of Frankish or Slavic descent. You look more like a Turk or an African slave than a Frenchman.”

“Don’t forget that the word ‘slave’ derives from the demonym ‘Slav,’” I replied.

“Surely you’re not serious?” Popov asked, alarmed.

A growing murmur spread among the judges, who found that my claim was grounded in the knowledge of the philologists in the language department. I wanted to voice my doubts about that theory, which rested on the Romans’ preference for slaves from the plains of the Volga, but the delight of fanning the flames with more flames was too much to resist.

“Could we spare ourselves the obvious questions?” I retorted, taking advantage of those faces dismayed by my allusion to their primitive past.

A fresh murmur rose in the room.

“How long have you been working at this

University?” Dementiev continued.

“Three months,” I answered, realizing that the opening questions had no purpose beyond intimidating me.

“Is it true that you accused a student of bribing you?”

“Not yet,” I answered curtly, “but before we go on, I would like to know the reasons for which I have been summoned to this trial; I have not yet formalized any accusation.”

“And you are also accused of damaging the University’s reputation,” Dementiev continued. “Did you state, yes or no, that the American University of Kyrgyzstan was a corrupt university?”

“Who says so?” I asked.

Eyes turned toward Leo, who remained impassive, taking notes in a notebook. I felt a bitter sensation then; that pupil, once so interested in my teaching, was giving up his humanity and his reason to become one more piece of that grotesque machinery. I wondered how and when they had intimidated him into incriminating me; yes, he was a victim, and through circumstances as absurd as those that set off Ionesco’s comedies: slaves of a system that admitted no dissent.

My curiosity turned anxious as I came to understand the dire consequences of my incorruptibility. I was being publicly vilified, and it was quite possible I would be back home and jobless before the academic year ended. And besides, what home would I return to? Anaïs had resigned from her position believing we would spend at least two years in Central Asia. We could go back to France or Colombia, but with what credibility would we be welcomed by relatives who had warned us of the dangers we would face in those lands of political and social instability?

The inquisitive stares of the committee members grew more pressing, and, for some strange reason, I felt

tempted to apologize. It was I, I thought, who had set that trial in motion, when, under pressure from Zernebog's classmates urging me in class to accept his offer, I had exclaimed that I would publicly denounce the corruption down to its very marrow. My students' frightened faces, at my warning, silenced them for a few brief moments: I gathered that bribery was, in truth, a widespread practice at the University. I had already heard unsettling comments from SEP administrators and from my colleagues, who—too late I understood it—showed a suspicious understanding toward corrupt professors who, because of their low salaries, so the argument went, were forced to accept bribes from their pupils.

Had a UN delegate whom Whitney had introduced us to at a restaurant not told us that his job was to travel through five-star hotels and the world's finest restaurants in order to pronounce that hunger in third-world countries was an economic problem with no solution? Had an Australian diplomat not told us, at Uriel's house, that all NGOs were in truth leeches that sucked up charitable donations?

My statement, delivered in a prophetic tone, had surprised even me, and the entire class had fallen silent, no doubt aware of the danger my accusations posed. Within minutes Irina had stood up, her face twisted with rage, and returned half an hour later with a summons from Dean Arkadina. When I answered her call, I received a stern reprimand, against which I defended myself by recounting what had happened.

"Zernebog has already spoken with me," was her reply. "What you're telling me is false; I've known Zernebog for years; he's a respected journalist. You, on the other hand, are a stranger; you arrived here barely two months ago."

"I was sent by the CPA," I retorted, undaunted, "an institution that hires only international academics."

"I'm sure this is a misunderstanding," Arkadina answered in a conciliatory tone. "Zernebog has taken private lessons with several professors before; the rector herself is aware of them."

"He offered me double my salary."

"I don't believe you."

I understood that they would resort to every possible denial before ever admitting I was right.

"In any case," I said, "how can you claim my statement is false? You must open an investigation."

"I've already opened it," she said, presumptuously, "and I've already closed it."

"I'll speak with Annula, my immediate superior at SEP."

"Excellent," Arkadina replied, defiantly. "She'll make clear to you that in Russia we respect old acquaintances and distrust newcomers."

"In Russia?" I repeated, pleased. "I've noticed that your diaspora indeed laments having lost this part of the world after the fall of the Soviet Union."

Arkadina turned pale and fell silent, no doubt regretting the slip. Tensions between Russians and Kyrgyz ran deep beneath the surface at that University, which, in its daily life, strained to feign a fraternity that did not exist.

On returning home I received an email from Zernebog, in which he tried to justify himself. That would be the only solid proof—so he made known to his sanhedrin during the trial—of my student's attempted bribery.

The judges watched me without their faces of contempt so much as flickering; it was clear they were using against me the sophisticated methods of psychological pressure imposed by Beria and Stalin; the open animosity of my colleagues was, without doubt, the greater emotional assault.

"All these Arab countries are corrupt," Parvaneh, my Anglo-Iranian colleague, had told me frankly. "The

cause of this problem isn't yours, Marco, it's Arkadina's. She married an American, and now that she has American children, it irritates her to put up with third-world professors in her own country. Besides, the rivalry between Turks and Russians over these lands has ancient, bloody roots. In their eyes, you're a Turk born in some distant land."

"What do you advise me?" I nodded.

"That you ignore what happened," she answered with a smile of superiority. "It's impossible for you to change the corrupt habits of this society. Unless..."

"Yes?" I pressed.

"Unless your story became local news," she mused, "unless the media debated the corrupt habits of your society and some new leader overthrew the current government with promises of greater control and honesty."

Dementiev's shrill voice pulled me from my thoughts.

"That is not solid proof!" he bellowed from the far end of the oval table. "Your mother tongue is not English!"

"We both speak it fluently," I replied. "In fact, all my classes are taught in English."

"You will understand," Vladimirovich cut in, "that only the use of one's mother tongue guarantees clarity of thought. The fact that Zernebog, who speaks Russian, and you, whose native language is Spanish, came to a misunderstanding, is explained by linguistics itself."

"If none of you endorse communicating in a second language," I replied, "then I fail to see the purpose of this trial, since neither is Russian my mother tongue, nor is Spanish yours."

"Here we enjoy a consensus that your private communications lack," Popov retorted.

I understood it would be useless to refute the absurd notions of that assembly.

"Would you accept that it was an involuntary bribe?" Professor Dementiev went on.

My convictions and my logic found themselves in ethical conflict. For a wealthy student like Zernebog, two weeks of private lessons made up for his semester's absences; for the locals, it mattered little or not at all that those lessons had been directly cancelled by Zernebog himself, and even less that the sum Zernebog had offered equaled the monthly income of the University's best-qualified professors. Zernebog, in fact, did this with all his subjects. It was clear that any professor who accepted Zernebog's offer would be bound to give him a good grade—regardless of his performance.

I answered Zernebog's email saying I would report what had happened to CPE, unless he admitted that his offer had been an attempted bribe. Having received no response, I wrote on Saturday morning to Annula, director of SEP, informing her of the facts. A meeting was arranged, hours later, with Arkadina for Monday at noon in Annula's office, located on the fourth floor of a building with exquisite interiors and a crumbling façade, just a few steps from my apartment.

We had met Annula on her first day in Kyrgyzstan. Her ugliness was striking: a cucumber-shaped nose, a face marked by acne, bulging eyes, and obesity—but even more striking was her sharpness; Annula held a PhD in Political Science from the University of Iowa and had written her thesis on the founding of the State of Israel. Sitting around a table, drinking coffee, I steered our conversation toward India. Annula surprised me at first; she traced the ethnic origins of the Aryans to Hindustan and spoke with optimism about relations between Hindus and Muslims.

"I was born into a Muslim family," she said, with a flash of embarrassment, "but I don't believe in religion or its superstitions."

After talking about Gandhi, Mircea Eliade, and his affair with Maitreyi Devi—without adding a single original

idea—Annula expounded her knowledge of antisemitism, accusing with inquisitorial zeal writers, philosophers, politicians, and journalists of having attacked the State of Israel. I understood that Annula was, in reality, just another bureaucrat of academia, who, given her religious ancestry, strove to ingratiate herself with the creed of her Jewish superiors, showing an inquisitorial zeal toward the enemies of the State of Israel.

“Whether the bribe was involuntary or not,” I said to the sanhedrin, allowing a sardonic smile, “is beside the point. What must be determined is whether the act occurred or not. And it certainly did.”

“What the secretary of this committee meant,” Leo cut in, narrowing his blue eyes, “is whether you believe it was a comment you misunderstood as a bribe. Forgive me, Professor Dementiev, if I correct your translation somewhat...”

“Dementiev’s translation was correct,” I murmured, my face composed.

The committee members’ eyes betrayed a flicker of astonishment.

Though I had chosen an MFA in film over a PhD in philosophy or theology, my interest in the arts, languages, history, journalism, and philosophy had earned me an erudition that surpassed that of most of my doctoral colleagues. That virtue, or excess, continually earned me the hostility of my coworkers; it was enough for me to correct a wrong fact, a surname, or a historical date, or to put forward some new thesis on a commonly accepted topic, for my interlocutors to brand me as presumptuous.

Thus, during a certain reconciliation meeting between liberals and conservatives in Bogotá, I stated that the right lacked any camaraderie, while the left demanded sinister complicities; and at a congress of Hispanists at the University of Manchester, where Spaniards and Englishmen strove to uncover mutual affinities between

academic toasts and imperial nostalgias, I gave a speech about those Englishmen who had shed their blood in Nueva Granada to free it from the Spanish yoke.

In Besançon, dining with Anaïs’s family and friends, Groumont—her septuagenarian stepfather, trained in university physics, a militant atheist and fervent French nationalist—suffered a fit of rage when I maintained that physicists bent on theorizing about the origin of life and the universe were, at bottom, nothing but speculators dressed up in equations, especially when the media pushed them into metaphysics, just as Anaximander and Democritus had done centuries before—not as administrators of some truth, but as free thinkers—under pluralist cosmologies.

To hold to disjunctions—without party, without network, without brotherhood—is to condemn oneself to unsettling right and left alike, Hispanists and Anglophiles alike, and physicists turned media celebrities alike. For to question the origin of the universe is not to close off the mystery, but to clarify perspectives; and to accept the plurality of visions and theories is the most honest approach to phenomena as vast as the soul, the world, or God—three supreme ideas which, according to Kant, must be grasped beyond the limits of reason.

2. A Third-Worlder Who Looks Turkish

They battle against the imposing authority of time
Simonides

Manchester, August 2, 2002

The good news arrived this morning, right after I gave Aristotle his water. Starting August fifteenth we will be living in Bishkek, the most tree-lined capital of the vanished Soviet Union. I cannot stop thinking about the cosmic significance of my new position as visiting professor at the American University of Kyrgyzstan. We will be heralds of the democratic values of South America, Europe, and the United States, and our chief task will be to instill virtue in a people battered by clientelism and corruption.

"And you?" I asked Aristotle, his tail curled, his eyes calm. "Will you keep purring across these rooftops until you find another philosopher to console you for the absence of your masters?"

I stroked him gratefully.

Although the local language of Kyrgyzstan is Kyrgyz, derived from Old Turkic, the official public language is still Russian. During my stay in England I set out to learn Arabic, but, owing to the bureaucracy of the universities of Salford and Manchester, I only had the chance to learn the language of Chekhov. That effort, hazy at first, eventually found its purpose. I now recall Inga, my thirty-year-old teacher at the University of Manchester, flirting shamelessly with Kevin, my only classmate, who was nineteen.

"You can't go on," she told me, her eyes lit with lasciviousness. "As a lecturer you don't have the privilege

of learning a new language without paying the cost of the course."

That episode discouraged me, to the point that I abandoned my Russian studies for two months, until this new job opportunity arose: "Graduates of American universities wishing to help consolidate democratic principles in the former republics of the now-extinct Soviet Union. Knowledge of Russian appreciated."

Anguish is distrust of what life has in store for us. I thought of the falseness of Sartre's postulates, who in *La Nausée* held that the individual is not important to existence: he had, in his own words, once believed existence itself was nothing but an empty form tacked onto outward things, changing nothing of their nature.

The very fate of Sartre—then eager for celebrity—refuted the anathema that made him famous in 1938, to the point that half of Paris attended his funeral in 1980.

My hiring is, in large part, a consequence of the attacks of last September eleventh; there are international programs that need teachers educated in the United States. Since the U.S. State Department had advised its citizens to stay away from conflict zones, I inferred that the NGOs would hire non-American graduates of American universities instead. Credentialed with my Master of Fine Arts in Film and Mass Communication, I answered the ad and had an interview with Arthur Holmes, an American in his thirties, tall and boyish-faced, on the steps of the Cathedral of the Virgin Mary in Liverpool.

"My destiny is to travel to a Russian-speaking country," I answered when asked about my interest in the region. "For two years I have studied the language of Pushkin with no other purpose than to read his great poets, novelists, and playwrights."

"Your CV is impressive," he told me. "And I see you studied film in Philadelphia. But have you taught journalism courses?"

"I studied it for a semester in Colombia," I

answered. "My documentary classes, in any case, are aimed at investigative journalists."

"Do you practice journalism?" he pressed.

"I write the occasional article for various publications. I have a few of them printed here."

Arthur skimmed the articles I had published in the Sunday Magazine of *Vanguardia Liberal*.

"I have no doubt about your contribution to the region's development," Arthur concluded, handing them back to me. "What concerns do you have about SEP?"

I asked him about the salary conditions.

"One doesn't get rich working in Central Asia!" he exclaimed, as emphatically as his phlegmatic temperament allowed. "You'll receive four thousand five hundred dollars for your one-year contract; on top of that you'll have the monthly salary from your assigned University, which, I can predict, will be modest."

"How modest?" I joked.

"Between fifty and a hundred dollars a month," he specified, "depending on the country. But bear in mind that salary can't be compared to one in England. Kyrgyzstan's minimum wage is barely five dollars a month. Besides..."

He fixed his gaze on some pensive point on the horizon.

"Yes?"

"We have offices in every country of the former Soviet bloc," he went on, "and, depending on your performance, we might invite you and your wife to travel and give lectures in Samarkand, Tashkent, or Budapest. We want our delegates to keep working with our organization for several years, even in the area of project management."

"I'll do my best to meet your expectations," I replied, considering that his promise of a bureaucratic post persuaded me far less than the prospect of reading Chekhov and Tolstoy in their original tongue.

Three months later, Rachel White, then director of SEP for Central Asia and Mongolia, telephoned me at my house in Manchester to offer me a one-year position in Kyrgyzstan. I told her I needed a week to think it over. I made my decision contingent on Anaïs's judgment; after two jobless years in Porto, she had managed, with my help, to secure a nine-month stay in Manchester through the Portuguese Ministry of Labor.

When Anaïs's company expressed interest in hiring her permanently, I left my teaching job in Porto to settle with her in Manchester, where Erik MacArthur, a professor at the University of Salford and a former student of Temple University, had expressed interest in bringing me on as a playwriting instructor.

For two years, Anaïs worked comfortably in the marketing department of Kirk Douglas Associates, an American consulting firm; SEP's offer carried certain rights and obligations: Anaïs would have to give up her job to accompany me to Kyrgyzstan. Both Arthur Holmes and Rachel White had assured me that the cost of living in Central Asia was low compared to England. Were we to believe them?

That conversation left a lasting impression on me. Rachel spoke with a sustained insistence, steering my decision toward the position. While describing the beauty of the landscape, the tourist activities, and the many trips across Central Asia—all funded by SEP—she mentioned, with particular enthusiasm, legendary Samarkand, capital of Tamerlane's empire. Hearing her, I lingered on historical reflections about the city and its founder, which seemed to sharpen her interest further.

She then praised my self-taught Russian as an admirable rarity among Westerners, and predicted that I would soon move about like a local, with an edge over the Americans, whom she described as dependent on translators. In that same current of enthusiasm, she floated the possibility of my traveling alone, and spoke of the

advantages of an untethered stay, as though my status as a married man posed no obstacle. I understood the reach of the insinuation and chose silence, which she navigated naturally, steering the conversation toward her own experience: she mentioned her husband, twenty years her junior, and spoke of her career within the organization with an ease that folded the personal into the same discourse with which she described the region.

Before hanging up, she reframed her proposal: if we traveled together, Anaïs and I could take part in conferences in various cities, moving as a couple. That closing detail balanced out her earlier remarks, though it revealed a pragmatic understanding of the incentives needed to draw European or American teachers into a region that, in our imagination, still wavered between its Soviet inheritance and the landscapes of a remote fable.

Later, on a train back from London, Anaïs had a vision that she would be well received in Central Asia.

"I was certain everything would go well for me in Bishkek," she told me on arriving, letting down her hair, "but I also saw that you would have a great many problems."

"Another one of your premonitions?" I asked, serving her the dinner I had made: dumpling soup.

"Voilà!"

"I'll bear them!" I exclaimed, assuming she meant Russian racism. "If life offers me this chance, there must be a reason."

"I knew you wouldn't change your mind," Anaïs insisted. "It isn't a metaphysical question! Always believing there are no coincidences, only causes! But read up on the violent nationalist groups of Kyrgyzstan before you decide."

"I'll be teaching Russians and Kyrgyz," I said. "Both still hold on to communist thinking, and it's possible they hate the Turks, whom I happen to resemble, but

everyone wants to join the first world."

"And you," Anaïs pressed, "are you truly of the first world?"

"What other Colombian," I argued in my defense, "is being given the chance right now to go teach in a Central Asian country and study Russian for two years?"

"Isn't that, precisely, the problem?"

"Won't they respect the fact that I speak seven languages?" I asked, puzzled.

"Maybe they won't accept you precisely because you're the first Colombian to go there not to learn, but to teach, in seven languages."

"I don't think they'd dare," I answered. "The Soros Foundation would accuse them of racism."

Anaïs rose from the table, shrugged in that French way of hers, and began washing the dishes from the dinner I had made her.

"Calm down," I said, looking into her eyes and gently taking her face in my hands. "In two years I'll find another job here or in the United States."

"That's not what worries me," Anaïs sighed. "You worry me... Doesn't it bother you to suffer?"

"Not at all," I answered brightly. "As long as I learn Russian, any suffering is passing."

We were leaving the United Kingdom, that fertile and fragile island ruling over every sea, for a new continent of freshly opened paths. So too came the end of my efforts to secure a doctoral scholarship at the University of Manchester.

We celebrated with Aristotle—he at the window, I in the tub, reading the final pages of the *Nicomachean Ethics* to the euphoric choruses of a Haydn mass.

Manchester, August 5, 2002

Anaïs, reluctant at first, is now the more eager of the two of us to travel to Central Asia. I called my grandmother Carmen, who congratulated me and asked me to enjoy what she herself had never had the chance to

enjoy: traveling to a new continent. My parents are, understandably, against this journey. The invasion of Afghanistan, a country near Kyrgyzstan, by the United States and its allies, has led them to believe we will be teaching in yurts in the deserts of Mongolia. As a counterargument, we have invited them to visit us in Bishkek, once an academy of the Soviet armed forces during the Cold War, the Politburo's summer retreat, and on the shores of the vast Issyk-Kul Lake, set at the antipodes of Lake Titicaca. We want to travel with them and with Fátima across the plains that once saw the hordes of Attila, Genghis Khan, and Tamerlane gallop, conquer, and die.

Besançon, August 12, 2002

On our way out, Aristotle was waiting for us on the sidewalk. I called him affectionately, and he trailed behind us the whole length of the empty street, until we left his territory; then he leapt away and vanished among the rooftops of Altrincham.

"You're going to miss him," Anaïs told me.

Aristotle had, indeed, been the creature I had socialized with the most during my two years in Manchester. I also said goodbye to our garden; despite our efforts, my geraniums will no longer have anyone to protect them from the snails that arrive with the little streams the rains form in Cheshire.

We left Manchester by bus and crossed the English Channel by ferry; we ate a sandwich with chips and went out onto the stern deck, where we watched in silence the waters and waves that had once battered the splendor of Spain before Shakespeare's own eyes.

The solitude that awaits shipwreck survivors seemed to wrap around us; we held each other, seized by the same emotion that only the sea D'Artagnan once crossed to honor his queen can awaken in those who sail

its waves.

We got off in Dijon at around nine in the morning. Anaïs's parents picked us up in their BMW, to which Groumont had hitched an extra little trailer.

"Not badly prepared," I said to Groumont.

"Well, we were told you'd be arriving with a hundred and forty kilos of luggage!" Groumont exclaimed, not hiding his displeasure.

"And the turn signals?"

Groumont simply pointed with his right hand to the bulbs, discreetly hidden in the trailer's woodwork, seasoning the gesture with that fake air of urgency he put on whenever my comments irritated him.

I reassured him once we reached Besançon, promising him I would take care to send all our belongings to Kyrgyzstan.

"In fact," I added, "we've already packed nearly five hundred books and a thousand classical music CDs that we'll be sending to Bishkek."

"That's not what worries me," Groumont told me, walking with me through his garden at dusk. "But Michelle knows you're going to a Muslim country. What happens if they kidnap her daughter?"

I realized that only Anaïs's future concerned him; if I were to disappear, he would thank the very Creator he so often denounced.

"There are no extremists in Bishkek," I said with that ironic smile that so pained him.

"And your income?" he pressed. "You won't have any job security there. What happens if you lose your job?"

"I'll find another."

Groumont simply shrugged with that contempt he no longer bothered to hide since my visit to his house the previous winter, when I had caught him watching pornography in his room.

"He'll get his revenge sooner or later," I told Anaïs at the time. "Groumont is a vengeful, sly, and violent

man.”

Yesterday I received my work contract. There are signs that seem to confirm our detractors’ fears; for one thing, Arkadina, dean of the Faculty of Communications, did not answer my repeated emails for a week, asking her which subjects I would be teaching. Her reply only reached me yesterday; she writes, word for word, that the native faculty resent the presence of a Latin American at the University; they feel that one of the reasons the Cold War was lost was that the Soviet Union invested in Cuba and in the guerrillas of Peru and Colombia. Her language is military in tone, revealing her ties to the KGB; it is said that all the [...] used to go study in the United States. The contract includes other perks, such as a furnished apartment; they write, incidentally, that it is one of the largest in the city. And if my future comrades have reason to smile gratefully at my American and European colleagues—some even of African descent—whose nations grant them scholarships and jobs, none of them, certainly, should have to put up now with a third-worlder acting as agent of American democracy, least of all one from Colombia, the scene of the Soviet Union’s ideological failures.

I think of Anaïs’s premonition and wonder whether she meant my great height and my olive skin. Kyrgyzstan is a resourceless nation, adrift, living off the favors of the four powers courting it: the Americans, the Russians, the Turks, and the Chinese. I would like to teach at the Turkish University of Bishkek, where I would surely be better received, but I have been assigned to the American University, made up mainly of Russians and Kyrgyz.

My wife already displayed her sibylline gifts last year with Onan, a colleague of hers at work.

“Congratulations!” she said to him one morning when she saw him.

“For what?” Onan asked, his face astonished.

“For your wife’s pregnancy!”

“But...” Onan answered. “You’re wrong! My wife can’t have children...”

Anaïs had apologized, after swearing she couldn’t remember who had told her. A week later, it was Onan who apologized to her, bursting with joy; the baby had been conceived the very night before Anaïs’s congratulations.

Bishkek, August 16, 2002

Just before we left, Anaïs handed me eighteen bottles of body moisturizer.

“I’m not leaving without them,” she told me with a determined air.

“Was this Michelle’s idea?” I asked, irritated. “Why do you listen to her? There are supermarkets in Bishkek too!”

“It’s me!” she protested. “Will you never believe I’m capable of making a decision on my own?”

I smiled by way of apology and, after a pause, hit on the idea of wearing my photographer’s vest and my Hamlet Unbound overcoat, with its eighteen pockets, to hold the creams. By the time we reached the airport, I looked like an obese man carrying thirty extra kilos.

“Admirable Mr. Saint-André,” an English flight attendant told me, watching me wipe my sweat-beaded brow, “traveling in summer wearing winter sweaters, waistcoats, and overcoats.”

Only when we crossed the green-blue waters, lit by the scorched yellow sun of the Caspian Sea, did I fully appreciate the audacity of our undertaking.

“You’re traveling to the past,” were Michelle’s words, unable to understand our departure from England.

Indeed, England being one of the most prosperous countries in the world, and seeing that I had already crated and shipped all our books and belongings, there was no

reason not to brand me a madman. “The very same epithet applied to my grandfather,” I thought, remembering the shot he survived after firing it into his own chest, a scene Gabriel García Márquez would recreate in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

Only a careful reading of Kierkegaard’s works could shed light on our motives. We believe in our destiny; everything unfolds according to a plan we sense as creators and remain ignorant of as its protagonists. We are not travelers, but inhabitants of the world; our stays in Portugal, in Salford, and in Manchester have been links in a study whose only end is literature; and if we are certain we will survive, it is because our destiny is none other than to write it. At the same time, I am human enough to doubt my own purposes. A failure is not merely an incidental act, but rather a correction for future daily battles.

We were met at the airport by Mirbek, a young Kyrgyz man about a meter sixty tall, who rocked his body as he smiled, his complexion marked by acne. He wore jeans, sneakers, and a rugby shirt.

“How’s it going?” was his greeting as we came off the plane.

He smiled, swaying his head in time with his right hand.

“Exhausted,” I told him. “You are...”

“Mirbek,” he answered. “But you can call me Rob. That’s my American name.”

I refrained from asking whether I might sponsor him with a Colombian name instead, like Jacinto or Nepomuceno.

“I’d rather call you Mirbek,” Anaïs cut in. “And I hope you’ll call us Marco and Anaïs.”

“You’re a lovely couple,” Mirbek smiled as he absorbed Anaïs’s irony.

“How long have you been working for SEP?” I asked Mirbek.

“They just hired me,” he stammered. “Follow me, please.”

Mirbek—or “Rob,” as he liked to call himself in front of foreigners—was not, as his enthusiasm suggested, a young man shaped by the ease of the American world, but the diligent product of a mediation. He came from a traditional family, related to Darixa, the SEP official whose severity was well known among her subordinates. It was she who had secured him one of the scholarships sent to Kyrgyz students in the United States, making sure all the requirements were met, even if that meant bending them.

He had arrived in Indiana at nineteen, too late for the ease of adolescence and too early for the autonomy of adulthood. There he discovered that Central Asian and Russian students tended to cluster in a kind of tacit ghetto, watched with distant curiosity by their American classmates. That proximity, far from easing his English, had hindered it; Mirbek chose instead to avoid his compatriots and take refuge in the domestic life of the family that hosted him.

He was neither good-looking nor self-assured. The acne marking his face, his shyness, and an uncertain pronunciation confined him to clumsy communication; yet his diligence made up for those shortcomings. He was always the first to volunteer for menial tasks: taking out the trash, cleaning the house, helping with home repairs—he even took part in replacing the roof’s woodwork—and that willingness earned him a growing fondness from his hosts.

He tried, nonetheless, to cross a line. He sought the affection of the family’s daughter—his adoptive sister—with an insistence that was first ignored and then plainly rejected. The father finally intervened to dissuade him: if he persisted, he would have to leave the house. That episode introduced a tension that was never fully resolved.

He returned to Bishkek the way so many do: with the tale of a triumphant American experience, built more on the need for prestige than on the facts. His kinship with

Darixa soon secured him a job as an intermediary for foreign visitors. There he perfected his strategy: presenting himself as “Rob,” smiling, translating, anticipating guests’ wishes, and, when possible, collecting tips from the Americans, who—he had been warned—were nothing like the Europeans arriving this time.

His fondness for chess followed the same pattern. He had taken part in a national championship of no great importance, but in his everyday retelling that episode easily became a loftier distinction, in keeping with the local custom of magnifying one’s own achievements before others.

Mirbek took our passports and led us down a narrow corridor with walls decorated with the enormous portraits of those I identified as members of the presidential family.

On the way we passed the Immigration Office, in front of which most of our fellow travelers, wearing grim expressions, stood almost motionless, trapped in a long line. To its left, before photos of the Kyrgyz tundra, we saw a small semicylindrical structure of white hides, gracefully rising to the height of our heads.

“It’s a yurt,” I told Anaïs, who could not stop smiling.

“Foreigners,” Mirbek murmured, puffed up with pride, “get three-hour lines: they have no idea how this country works.”

We entered a small air-conditioned lobby, where a slender girl offered us an infusion. Shortly after, a middle-aged blonde woman approached and asked us a few questions in Russian, which Mirbek translated. The woman invited us to sit on one of the leather sofas scattered around the lobby; Mirbek then pulled two fifty-dollar bills from his wallet, which the woman took without any show of surprise; she smiled and handed Mirbek a receipt in return.

“Welcome to Kyrgyzstan,” the blonde woman told us, almost apologetically.

Mirbek helped us with our luggage and introduced us to Sultan, SEP’s driver, a short, ruddy, round-faced man of about forty-five, always smiling, who, we soon learned, also worked for the local police.

“But don’t tell anyone,” Mirbek explained with an air of mystery. “Otherwise he’ll lose his job.”

Even though it was nearly four in the morning, we were wide awake, sleepless, victims of that anxiety only the first impressions of a city on a new continent can stir.

The air was bitterly cold as we climbed into Sultan’s Mercedes. Mirbek told us about his recent experience in Indiana and New Mexico, where he had just finished an internship. His English was good, though, as happened with many Russian-trained speakers, it showed an erratic use of articles, alternating between omitting them and overusing them, and he often dropped the verb “to be.”

Sultan started the car, and my eyes were caught by a succession of empty lots, abandoned houses, and buildings on the verge of collapse. Sultan drove through dark, deserted streets. At the same time, we caught glimpses of prosperity: a modern gas station and a highway lined with billboards for banks and multinational corporations. Its route forked amid colored lights near the shopping center that preceded the city’s two five-star hotels.

Nearly a kilometer further on we entered Chuy Prospect, Bishkek’s widest and longest avenue, flanked by small shrubs and built according to the canon of the Second French Republic: without walls, ditches, or façades behind which potential invaders of the presidential palace might entrench themselves.

Mirbek told us Chuy Avenue was the most brightly lit in Bishkek.

“Anything darker than this would be pitch black,” I blurted out impulsively.

"In this country we don't waste our resources," was his revealing reply.

Sultan smiled at me with a hint of complicity through the rearview mirror.

I would later learn that Sultan had come to SEP on Rachel's recommendation, having first met him as the driver assigned to her on her arrival. His affable manner and constant diligence soon placed him in a position of trust. He also worked for the police and knew the city beyond its streets: its rhythms, its silences, and its points of friction.

Over time, his role expanded; for Rachel, and later for many of us, Sultan became indispensable, a kind of Friday to our Robinson Crusoe, or a Sancho Panza to the Don Quixotes that, in a certain sense, we all were on that remote island, or in that vast, untamable medieval landscape.

Sultan gave shape to our aspirations within an environment governed by other logics. He would also, when the time came, be the one to ease our way out, once circumstances began to grow uncertain.

Then, emerging from the darkness and wrapped in a thin mist, we saw the imposing silhouette of one of the men most despised by my parents and by the teachers at my school: Lenin.

"It's one of the few, if not the only one, still standing," Anaïs whispered. "All the other statues of Lenin were torn down after the fall of the Soviet Union."

"It's our history," Mirbek said, with a defiant look. "We can't deny what we are."

I had the impression that communism had not yet been sufficiently forgotten by the people of that country. How could one abandon it in a mere ten years? The Kyrgyz had kept their loyalty to the Soviet Union up until the day before its dissolution, December 26, 1991. Could it be possible that the philosophers' dream of equality and

justice would flourish on this abandoned land? This country had not gone through a war of independence, as its neighbors had. The people of Kyrgyzstan woke up one day cut off from Moscow's control, whose elite had not hesitated to shed what it called the parasitic republics, those that produced little and received much.

The Kyrgyz endured great hardships, for they found themselves in the middle of winter when the flow of supplies was cut off for nearly three months. There was hunger, but, as during the sieges of the Second World War, those still Soviet in spirit found ways to survive. They suffered riots, and, when some Russians were massacred, most of the educated population left the city. Decades of racial discrimination had, however, reduced the native Kyrgyz to manual and agricultural labor; the national economy collapsed, and the new dictator, or president, Askar Akayev, seeing his nation on the verge of returning to the fourteenth century, when it had been little more than an inn along the Silk Road, kept the Slavic Kyrgyz who had dared to endure fierce Muscovite discrimination in place with favors and land titles. Akayev also lured back thousands of ethnic Russians, and Frunze lost its name—fatally tied to the KGB—to be renamed Bishkek.

Now the sun shines through the window of our immense, yet abandoned apartment in the center of Bishkek; it is a triple iron-framed window, weathered by pollution. Yes, we were warned in our contract that our living conditions in Central Asia would be quite different from those of York and Philadelphia. Vive l'Union Soviétique! And yet we cannot help lamenting the filth left by our landlord. On arriving, around five in the morning, after twenty hours of travel, we climbed two flights, picking our way through construction rubble, and entered an immensely empty, ramshackle apartment. We were so exhausted that we threw ourselves onto the beds, not knowing they were covered in dust. Only the next morning, sitting at the kitchen table, did I notice, in a

mirror, my face blackened with dust.

There is a small kiosk a few meters from the building's entrance; there I practiced my Russian vocabulary, asking for eggs, bread, ham, and milk. They had no bread left, so I bought naan, which here is a crusty flatbread edged with a soft curl of unleavened wheat. I also bought juice and Coca-Cola, four times more expensive than the milk, which, to our delight, is fresh from the cow; then a red-cheeked Russian girl with golden curls approached me, wearing a colorful dress far too big for her frame. In clipped English she told me that about a hundred foreigners lived in this apartment complex.

"I'm Mischa," she said, offering me her hand.

I then realized she was older than one might think: twelve? thirteen? I studied her figure, one of those that so delighted Nabokov.

She boldly asked me whether I was single, and, when I told her I wasn't, she said it was a shame, because every foreign man who arrived in Bishkek left the country married.

"Of course, for you," she added flirtatiously, "it would have taken some time."

"How so?"

"With that Turkish face of yours..."

I sensed I had walked into the lion's mouth.

"Do you live with your parents?"

"No," she told me. "I'm an orphan."

And, without giving me time to react, she ran off toward the complex's main entrance, where a group of teenagers were waiting for her.

I watched Mischa: her thin legs, her budding figure, and I reflected on her assertiveness—unbefitting her age, a sign of precocity, or of an urgency to negotiate her place in the world before she had even come to inhabit it. In her gaze I found no shyness at all, only a precarious calculation; an early form of adaptation that in other contexts would

have passed for insolence.

"Do you like her?" a sturdy, blue-eyed man of about thirty asked me in Russian.

"No," I replied, unsettled. "You're mistaken."

He wore tight jeans and a white polo shirt with faded pale-blue stripes. Thick thighs and forearms betrayed his daily devotion to the gym.

"I was joking," the man said, backing off and offering me his hand. "I'm Vladimir."

In his apology I saw an embarrassed sincerity. Vladimir was not, as his trade might suggest, a man prone to bad influences. His clothes were impeccable, and his bearing, even under fatigue, retained a certain dignity. He was, in fact, an attractive man. I understood then that, like so many in the informal tourism circuit, he knew well the silent logic of foreigners: those who arrive with money arrive also with their weaknesses, their vices, or their cardinal sins, and not a few seek the exoticism of indulging them far from their homeland, where they would be judged by their peers.

That is, perhaps, one of the most ambiguous freedoms offered by nomadic life: acting without witnesses. The true solitary nomad. I, however, traveled with a wife, and with her a kind of ethical commitment—as Kierkegaard would say—that made such anonymity impossible.

I later learned, through an affair he had with one of the SEP teachers, that Vladimir was frequently pursued by foreign women looking for something more than a guide or a driver. He did not seem surprised; he accepted the attention with a mix of courtesy and distance, like someone who has learned to give in when it suits him without ever fully committing.

He did, however, have a family, with whom he kept a strained relationship. I later learned he was addicted to morphine, a dependency not uncommon in these lands, one that many women complained about openly. Perhaps

it was a form of inherited evasion, a residue of an era in which obedience and silence were conditions of survival.

Vladimir belonged to that generation raised to live without asking, without questioning. In an environment like that, appearance, the body, opportunity—all of it could become currency. This was not, however, a trait exclusive to this country; it was, rather, a local variation of a universal practice.

“A pleasure,” I said, shaking his hand.

“It’s a shame morphine has left her in that state,” he told me casually. “I live near this park. I’m a taxi driver.”

He gave me his phone number; he lives just steps from the complex and is always available, he assured me, even at night.

We gathered up a dozen dusty rugs and stuffed them into a closet. We found that the people of the Soviet Union lived as sloppily as civilization would allow. Anaïs hurt one of her toes on a nail sticking out of the wooden floor. We rushed straight to the hospital in Vladimir’s taxi.

“It’s a culture of survival!” I said, irritated. “How can they house us in an apartment with exposed nails?”

“Nothing here is new!” Vladimir said. “Every fixture has to be used until it can no longer be repaired.”

As a result, we caught a cold from the unhealthy air we breathed while cleaning, for two days, our spacious apartment in the least populated capital in the world—and, even so, one of its most polluted.

Bishkek, August 17, 2002

I bought a pair of pliers and a file, with which I pulled out the loose nails. As we cleaned five bedrooms, two balconies, the single bathroom, and the kitchen, I console myself with the thought that I am living in the Soviet Union. Going out, I see, by the dumpster, five families of nomads greeting one another every morning, waiting, as in the slums of Porto, for their turn at the

bathroom, the true center of their social life. And you should see our washing machine! For decades they used the technology of the fifties. What a wonderful setting for a writer! What passions, romances, punishments, confrontations, and deaths must have played out there!

Our dwelling is spacious, but exposed to pollution. Built on the second floor, the living room and kitchen windows face our garden, a shared area where, confirming the Soviet precept that disgust is a bourgeois excess, the neighbors pile up their trash bags. The morning walk through those grounds is instructive, especially for children, who enjoy a slide, three swings, and a seesaw; the rhythm of their play is set to the bam-bam of wooden mallets beating against the rugs the community hangs and dusts off on iron railings. This scene takes up a third of the garden. Toward evening, amid clouds of dust, whole families can be seen sharing laughter and glasses of vodka in front of the entrance kiosk. We cross the wide living room and come out into a hallway leading to four bedrooms; from three of them we look out onto a main street, polluted with noise and smog; along it roll, in both directions, old cars and vans, nearly all of them Ladas. Only rarely do we see a luxury car with diplomatic plates.

We discovered a local restaurant where we had laghman for lunch, a noodle dish in tomato paste with other fresh vegetables, at a fairly modest price. On our way home, Mirbek told us the five families I had seen survive off the mountain of rotting fruit and meat in the dump. That morning, three women had attacked and cut the face of a beggar who had tried to steal the remains of a can of ham from their territory. I reported the crime to Darixa, a slim, self-important Kyrgyz woman in her thirties, who, opening her jaw in an exaggerated way, advised me to forget about it, adding that beggars often die in street brawls.

Darixa has the manners of a satrap: used to shouting at her subordinates, she narrows her eyes

impatiently every time I ask her a question. When she saw me walk into her office and read that I was French-born, she couldn't hold back her laughter, hiding her contemptuous expression behind her fingers. She excused herself and stepped out of her office for nearly ten minutes, which gave me time to study her belongings. Photos with a woman who looked like her, probably a sister, alongside a bald, green-eyed man in his seventies, in Washington D.C. and New York, showed her eagerness to become American. Portraits of two children, one of European appearance and the other of Asian appearance, showed that she was their mother or aunt; her preference for the European-looking child was clear from the number of framed photos on her shelves: nine against only two of the Asian-looking child. What caught my attention was that she had barely a dozen books on her shelf: six in Russian, four in English, and two in Kyrgyz. Two volumes were by the same author: the *Complete Works* of Ivan Vasilyevich Kireyevsky.

"I studied in Indiana," she told me on returning from what I assumed was the bathroom, with that girlish look she wears to flaunt her superiority in class, "and my sister is married to an American. In a few years I'll get my American citizenship too. Then they'll treat me better at customs; a few months ago I was questioned by a Latino like you, supposedly because I came from a Muslim nation."

"She's bitter," I told Anaïs once we were home. "She's sick of being discriminated against for carrying the passport of an Islamic nation. She doesn't yet realize that, once she gets her citizenship—if she ever does—they'll go on discriminating against her because of where she's from."

"Did you notice how the Kyrgyz women look like the Chinese?"

"Narguiza and Darixa?" I thought about it.

"Maybe; they remind me more of Japanese women."

"I asked Darixa whether Kyrgyzstan and China were sister nations; she denied it with a haughty look and added that she descends from red-haired warriors, and that her skin is Slavic."

"Maybe they used to dye their hair," I joked, to Anaïs's delight, who burst out laughing. "Have you noticed the bookshelf she keeps in her office?"

"Not really..." she answered, intrigued.

"There are several volumes by an author named Kireyevsky. I looked him up in the Soviet encyclopedia at the University library, and I read, thanks to the kind translation of Filipa, my fifty-something Russian teacher, that he was a pro-Slavic philosopher of the mid-nineteenth century. He believed the world was destined to be ruled by the Slavs and by the cultures that adopted their values, including those of the Orthodox Church."

"But Darixa is an atheist."

I shrugged in that French way.

"I also saw other, more modern books about Kireyevsky. It's possible his ideas have been recycled and adapted for the twenty-first century. What's interesting is that Kireyevsky doesn't ground his regionalism in race, but in the Russian language."

"You're probably right," Anaïs replied. "When I mentioned to Darixa the reasons why they might have lost their Slavic ancestry in just twenty generations, she explained that the arrival of the Tatars had spoiled their appearance. She noted that Eastern genes are stronger and end up overriding the Slavic ones."

"I'd venture to say," I sighed, "that Darixa is a byproduct of eighty years of Soviet brainwashing."

Yesterday I saw a man collapse in the street; he was thin, about seventy, wearing a woolen Kyrgyz hat and a threadbare grey wool suit. We helped him with a coffee I paid a shopkeeper for, but it was already too late; according to the ambulance crew that came for the body, he died of

hunger or indigestion.

The poverty of this beautiful land is heavy with hopelessness. The slopes of the Andes and the savannahs of Africa are more generous than the tundra and eroded mountains of Kyrgyzstan. Colombia, after all, is a land of mild summer, softened by fertile valleys and mountains with plains. Medellín and Bucaramanga are prosperous cities compared to helpless Bishkek. Even in Bogotá the most wretched or despised man can get a cup of hot chocolate at the church of the Santo Niño Jesús. Would it be rash to claim that the Catholic Church is an effective charitable institution, counterproductively displaced by the inefficient NGOs now swarming the regions that were once part of the former Soviet Union? It frightens me to admit that I myself belong to one such NGO.

That night, Mirbek visited us, accompanied by a thin woman with short hair, about fifty, with a delicate face and an aquiline nose.

"Let me introduce Parvaneh," he greeted us, "an English doctor of Iranian descent, who has just published a book on the customs of the middle class in Iran."

"All the sociological studies focus on popular culture!" she explained a few minutes later, in her apartment, a small space, but better kept than ours. "In my book you'll find a detailed account of the habits of our bourgeois culture."

"Like in Balzac's novels?" I asked.

Parvaneh burst out laughing.

"I have a Peruvian friend in London," she whispered, in a confiding tone, and, narrowing her eyes in a way that left no doubt about her intentions, added, "I know you Latins well."

The impression Parvaneh left on me that night was ambiguous from the start. At first glance she still had something of the woman she surely had been decades earlier: a delicacy in her movements, a certain natural grace

in the way she tilted her face while listening, and an easy, constant, almost professional laugh; and yet, time had left visible marks on her. Her body had that peculiar disproportion of those who were once very heavy and then thinned abruptly, perhaps through surgery or one of those extreme diets that circulate among well-off classes obsessed with appearance; the skin of her face seemed to have lost its support, as though it had lost its tautness too quickly, and her sagging cheeks gathered the flesh around her mouth and eyes, giving her a tired air that contrasted with the enthusiasm of her gestures.

Even so, there was something charming about her; not exactly attractive—at least not to me anymore—but a femininity cultivated over years: the way she laughed before finishing a sentence, the confiding lean toward whoever she was speaking with, the evident pleasure she took in light flirtation. She flirted naturally, though that did not necessarily imply desire; it seemed to be simply part of how she inhabited the world, the same way other people smile out of courtesy or raise their voice to assert authority. With men and women alike she kept that playful tone, as though she needed to establish, right away, a small theatrical intimacy.

Still, beneath that cordiality one sensed something sharper. Her laughter could also be read as a form of superiority, a barely concealed irony; years later, in London, I would come to understand that first impression better. Americans have a precise word for it: patronizing; no Spanish equivalent quite captures it. "Condescending" or "paternalistic" barely brush its meaning, for in Parvaneh there was that intimate conviction of always being one step ahead of everyone else, as though she surveyed the world from an intellectual height that let her spot naïvetés invisible to the rest.

She liked to display her sharpness; making quick, seemingly obvious observations, delivered with the satisfaction of someone who believes she has exposed

some collective illusion. She held a strong attachment to common sense, but a common sense wielded almost as a weapon; as a result, she rarely paused to consider the private reasons behind people's actions, preferring instead to interpret them through a practical, skeptical logic.

I remember, in particular, a scene that took place years later, already in London. I had told her, with some enthusiasm, that I was job-hunting in the theater world and had applied for an administrative post at a West End theater: they needed someone to organize schedules and internal work structures. She listened in silence, and then, thinking I couldn't hear her, remarked to my then-wife that it was illusory to think such an institution would hire someone with no prior experience in England; she said it in that tone of hers, half amused and half indulgent, as though watching some dreamy boy ignoring the basic rules of reality.

And yet there was something she did not understand: for me, simply trying already mattered; the possibility of failure never invalidated the attempt. I did not get that job, it's true; even so, shortly after I found work at Harrods, modest but legitimate, and I still remember how that fact quietly shifted Parvaneh's attitude. Almost at once she urged her son to send his résumé to the same place; it was as though the experiment had stopped seeming absurd the moment someone else showed it could work.

Her son did not get into Harrods, though he later found work at a smaller London firm; I came to think then that Parvaneh's real problem was neither malice nor contempt, but a kind of learned cynicism, an excess of practical lucidity that ended up paralyzing those close to her. She had turned caution into a philosophy of life, into a self-directed cynicism that bound her hand and foot and kept her from knocking on the great doors life set before her; she preferred to anticipate failure rather than risk the ridicule of wanting too much.

The saddest case of that self-deprecating, paralyzing philosophy was that of her last love: a seventy-six-year-old German named Werner, with whom she kept an oddly clean, almost administrative relationship. We had dinner with them in London several times; Werner had a considerable fortune, and yet never once treated us to a meal. He did, however, pay for Parvaneh's plate every time they went out together, as though even in affection he needed to keep a rigorous, discreetly selfish accounting.

She wanted to marry him and asked him more than once; Werner, however, always gave the same answer: his children were against it, and he was not willing to go against them. I advised her to force him to decide, to give him an ultimatum, since it seemed obvious to me that the man would drag out the situation indefinitely as long as nothing threatened his comfort. But Parvaneh was unable to do it; by her own logic, it was only natural that his children should want to prevent the marriage, and, besides, she insisted she would have reacted the same way had she been in their place. That tendency of hers to justify other people's obstacles in advance ended up becoming a form of obedience; she rationalized other people's refusals so thoroughly that she ended up colluding with them.

Years later I learned that Werner had died. She called me from London, when I was already living in Colombia; she spoke for a long while in a strangely restrained voice, and, though she came close to tears, she held herself in check with that particularly English emotional rigidity that turns grief into long silences and short breaths. And yet, precisely in those pauses, she told me she knew she had made a mistake; she had waited too long, had accepted too much, and now she was left not only without the possibility of marriage or the emotional inheritance she had imagined, but also without that modest routine of the cheap London restaurants she and Werner used to visit, without that small fiction of stability that, for years, had been, for her, love.

Mirbek told me he had once been his country's national chess champion in a national tournament. I promised him I would buy a chess set, and Mirbek recommended I get one hand-carved at the city's Russian market.

3. A Welcome Coffee

I live in the mutable, he in the eternal; I live in
prose, more than in poetry
Lawrence Durrell

In the afternoon we met Annula, SEP's newly promoted director, and Rachel, her predecessor, who took us to the most exclusive café in the city, set just a few steps from the presidential palace.

Annula was an Indian woman, tall and heavyset; she did not laugh so much as roar with that boldness so typical of women who stake their success on the charm of their personality.

Rachel was an American matron whose face bore a certain resemblance to Jane Fonda's; though I could not call her beautiful, given her pronounced double chin and her loose, bristly hair. Both women warned us against night walks and the local water, a warning that came too late, since we had already spent two days on IV drips after being poisoned by the apartment dust and the tap water.

"And what led you to leave SEP?" I asked Rachel, indiscreetly.

"I was offered another job in Tashkent," she answered, not very convincingly.

I got a better answer when, around six in the evening, I watched her reaction on encountering a middle-aged man in a suit and tie, with a bushy moustache and thinning blond hair, about two meters tall, escorted by a slender teenage girl. He gave us a vague smile before turning his back and walking off awkwardly.

"And walking hand in hand!" Rachel whispered to Annula.

"Who is he?" I asked.

"Daniel Weiler," Rachel said, twisting her lips, "president of the American University of Kyrgyzstan."

At that moment Jeff walked in, a man astonishingly similar to Steven Spielberg. After introducing himself as SEP's academic director, he leaned over and said a few words into Rachel's ear. She smiled, turned toward us, and said, in a shrill voice feigning indifference:

"We were just talking about Gina Weiler's new novel... sorry, Gina Wallace. About Aphrodite's many infidelities with Vulcan."

Daniel Weiler paused for a second, looked coldly at Rachel, and said, without losing his composure:

"I doubt the patrons of a Bishkek café are interested in hearing you shout out the plot of that novel, Rachel."

It was then that we noticed Polina's graceful figure, returning from the bathroom just as Rachel mentioned Vulcan; she wore a summer miniskirt printed with charcoal-drawn geraniums and poppies, so light it revealed glimpses of her underwear beneath her long tanned legs, and a top tied at the nape that barely contained her full, firm, provocative breasts, its knot looking ready to give way with every movement. She walked with the ease of someone who knows every gaze falls on her figure.

"Really, Daniel?" she asked, her voice soft but clear. "Would you rather they'd compared you to Mars?"

Weiler looked at her for a moment; then he smiled with that mix of cynicism and authority we were already beginning to recognize in the powerful men of Bishkek.

"I'm from the generation that doesn't make war, but love," he said, "and I have no problem with my wife going about freely with her young friends..."

"Or her best friends..." Rachel cut in.

"...as long as she knows who will love her when she comes home. My wife doesn't need any other 'best friend' besides her husband."

Rachel let out a short, sharp laugh.

"You'd laugh reading the pathetic Vulcan in Gina's

novel; he believes that, being so misshapen, he was chosen by the most beautiful of all, knowing full well she'll take lovers behind his back."

The air grew heavy. Polina turned slowly toward Rachel; her eyes, sweet until then, flared with fury.

"It's the same plot as Cervantes's *The Jealous Old Man*," I put in, trying to smooth things over.

During our stay we learned that Rachel had been raised on the feminist theories of the nineties, which proclaimed that no man would ever again impose his will on a woman. She took that principle as a rule of life and established herself as a critical figure against every form of male authority. Proud of her toughness, she wholeheartedly adopted the model of the unyielding woman the era celebrated: the harsher and more unapproachable, the greater her chances of making her mark on the world. She allowed for no weakness, no concession whatsoever.

That upbringing, however, did not sit fully well with her nature. Her desire drew her toward men, while many of the professors who had shaped her had oriented their lives toward other women; Rachel tried to fit into those circles, moved as much by intellectual conviction as by the academic fashion of the moment, but she did not stay in them.

She studied political science and, thanks to her Jewish ancestry and her kinship with a senator, found a swift path into the Soros Foundation. She was called to Washington, where she took part in the early organization of programs for Central Asia. The stated mission was to promote democratic values; in practice, Rachel soon understood that the real operation depended on securing State Department funds and aligning interests with figures close to Congress.

Her senator relative opened doors for her and let her manage directly funded programs. Before long she began collecting significant commissions from the

resources she brought in, which consolidated her influence within the structure.

That was how she came to the American University of Kyrgyzstan, an institution that stirred suspicion among the locals, who saw it as an extension of American power after the Cold War. Even the change of name—from American university to American University of Kyrgyzstan—had been meant to answer such criticism without altering its nature.

It was in that setting that she met Jeff, whose presence, reinforced by his resemblance to media figures, won him instant acceptance. Rachel built with him a relationship grounded in access to resources and the distribution of power. In their early years together they consolidated considerable influence over the Central Asia program.

“Don’t you ever speculate about me again as though I were a character in my ex-wife’s novel,” Weiler said, his voice trembling with contained fury.

Rachel smiled, feigning surprise; she had gotten what she wanted.

Polina leaned toward her husband’s ear and exchanged a few words with him, until, with an air of indignation, they both rose from their seats.

“Leaving so soon?” Jeff asked.

“For you, we’d stay, my dear Mars,” Daniel smiled, “but I don’t think it would amuse your Vulcan.”

I smiled, surprised by the naïveté of a man I had until then been told was a heartbreaker. Rachel’s expression hardened.

“You know what’s pathetic about those feminists, my darling?” Polina said, in pristine English. “They spend their time criticizing couples with an age gap, like us, without ever noticing that they themselves are thirty years older than their husbands.”

“At least we didn’t marry for citizenship,” Rachel

snapped, sipping her coffee.

Polina then picked up the glass of water that had been set on their table and, without another word, threw it directly in Rachel’s face. The water struck her full in the face, soaking her hair and blouse, running down over her prominent double chin. Her makeup streaked down her cheeks in dark rivulets.

For a moment there was nothing on the terrace. Not a sound. Not a movement. Only Polina, breathing hard, her chest rising and falling beneath her top, and Rachel, drenched, motionless.

Weiler reacted quickly. He gripped her firmly by the arm while a burly waiter came running over. Between the two of them they managed to restrain Polina, who was still trying to break free, spitting out phrases in Russian I did not fully understand, but whose tone made their meaning clear enough.

Rachel, water dripping down her face and her makeup smeared, remained seated with a cold, almost triumphant smile, as though she had gotten exactly what she wanted.

“I’ll go to the restroom,” she said, looking at no one.

Annula followed her.

Anaïs, Jeff, and I were left among half-full glasses and a water-splattered tablecloth. Jeff spoke about the weather, as Anglo-Saxons tend to when they no longer want to talk about anything. I found him astonishingly similar to Steven Spielberg. Eventually he told us he was SEP’s academic director.

Rachel’s reign at SEP broke down in its fourth year. The crisis erupted around internal conflicts involving personal relationships and power struggles. Rachel remained close to Gina, whose situation was affected by the bond her partner, Dr. Weiler, president of the university, formed with a woman forty years his junior. Rachel took a stand on the matter, which sharpened

tensions already simmering with the university's leadership.

The conflict reached a turning point with the scandal surrounding Valentino Smith, the professor accused of carrying on a homosexual affair with one of his students. The authorities made use of prejudices inherited from the Soviet environment to delegitimize both the professor and the positions Rachel defended. When Leo, the young lover, turned against his professor, accusing him of pressuring him through grades, Rachel's agenda—which included accepting sexual diversity—was exposed as a vulnerable element within a structure that did not share it.

From that moment an open confrontation broke out. Rachel used her control over resources to restrict the flow of funds to the university, which provoked an immediate reaction. It was then that Bill, a professor of political studies, drew up a lengthy report detailing abuses of power, irregularities in resource management, and questionable practices within the foundation.

The document triggered a formal summons. She was informed of the need to step down from her post, and the opening of an investigation into fund management and possible bribery was hinted at. Rachel chose to resign before facing that process.

Before stepping down, she installed Annula as her successor. She had recognized in her an absolute loyalty and a willingness to uphold the structure without question. Rachel trusted that, through Annula, she could keep an indirect influence over the program's operations, extending her presence in the region from a less visible position.

Rachel returned to the table beaming, recovered from her scuffle with her nemesis's lover. Jeff whispered a few words in Rachel's ear. Then they kissed passionately, which struck us as odd for that part of the world.

"We're married!" Rachel told us, by way of explanation. "Didn't you know?"

I shook my head with a smile, wondering whether I should have guessed as much from our phone conversation.

Rachel's face hardened, no doubt lost in the image of Weiler walking off with Polina across the former Soviet square. In her eyes there was a mix of humiliation and satisfaction: she had managed to wound him, but not to destroy him.

"Would you like to know who Daniel Weiler really is?" she asked, with a bitter smile.

No one answered. Annula stayed silent. Jeff studied his glass. Anaïs and I understood that this woman had spent years waiting for the moment to tell of that fall.

"Daniel had every advantage a man destined for power in the United States is born with," Rachel began, "Scandinavian ancestry, two meters tall, the face of a tamed Viking, gentle manners, a Southern education, and an extraordinary ability to stay silent when everyone else was talking too much. He wasn't especially brilliant. I never once heard a memorable idea come out of his mouth. But he understood something more useful than intelligence: he knew how to listen in silence and make decisions right when no one expected him to act.

She took a sip of coffee.

"At Princeton they quickly understood that men like him inspire automatic trust. Tall, blond, impeccably dressed, with that perfectly groomed moustache, always clean-shaven, always smelling of expensive cologne... he seemed designed by a committee of wealthy old ladies to run educational institutions. They recommended him swiftly to head a small college. He rose slowly, because he never made visible enemies. If he destroyed someone, he did it without ever raising his voice."

Rachel let out a short laugh.

"His dream was to preside over Princeton someday. He believed that was his natural destiny. But then the trouble began."

She leaned toward us.

"He had spent years flirting with students, assistants, and young professors. Nothing too scandalous at first: ambiguous comments, private invitations, vague promises. But with the rise of campus feminism, old complaints started being revisited. Several students spoke up. So did other professors. Daniel survived thanks to his connections with the boards. American elites protect each other with admirable efficiency: they don't call it a mafia; they call it networking."

Annula let out an involuntary laugh.

"When he realized he would sooner or later be quietly pushed out, this university in Central Asia turned up. No one important wanted to come here after September eleventh. To many Americans, any Muslim territory was simply a blurred extension of the Arab world. Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan... to them it was all the same. Daniel had never heard of Bishkek."

Rachel slowly stirred her spoon.

"He talked Gina into coming."

Her voice changed.

"Poor Gina. She was a woman who trusted her husband more than she trusted herself. She wrote unbearably bland drawing-room novels, small bourgeois tragedies no one remembered a week after reading them. But she believed deeply in Daniel. She saw him as an exceptional man and was convinced her destiny was to stand by him. Now she's trying to sell her misfortune as literature: the story of a woman betrayed in Kyrgyzstan. And I have to admit something cruel... revenge has finally made her a better writer."

Anaïs suppressed a smile.

"When they got here," Rachel went on, "they quickly understood how the money worked. The Soros Foundation funded projects. Daniel would submit programs, secure resources, and distribute the money with

an orderliness many people here considered almost virtuous, because at least it kept money flowing within the university. In Central Asia I've known men who steal everything. Daniel stole with administrative elegance."

"And Polina?" I asked.

Rachel raised her eyes to me.

"Ah, Polina..."

For the first time, she seemed to acknowledge her beauty.

"She was clever, though not brilliant. Never the best student. But she'd been raised the way so many beautiful young women in this region are: she knew her beauty was political capital. She was thoroughly spoiled. Since she was a teenager she'd been saying she had no intention of marrying an ordinary man. She wanted the richest, or the most powerful, or the most handsome. If she could combine all three in one man, so much the better."

She glanced toward the bathroom where Polina had vanished minutes earlier.

"When she showed up in Daniel's office asking for a scholarship, he thought it would be a brief affair. She thought exactly the opposite."

Jeff lowered his eyes.

"She came back several times with incomplete paperwork. Something was always missing. There was always a need for another private meeting. One afternoon they stayed alone in the office late into the night. After that, all of Bishkek started talking."

Rachel smiled cruelly.

"Rumors grow like wildfires here. Some of Daniel's enemies started saying they wanted to report him for adultery. Others claimed that in Soviet times something like that would have ended his career, or even sent him to prison. Probably absurd exaggerations... but in this city rumors always sound truer than the files."

"And Gina?" Anaïs asked.

"Daniel was faster than her. He handed her papers she signed thinking they were administrative documents. They were divorce papers. By the time she tried to react, everything was already legal. Daniel was already living at the Hyatt with Polina."

Annula closed her eyes.

"And they threw a huge wedding," Rachel said, "as if the scandal were some kind of coronation."

She fell silent.

"What was unbearable wasn't the infidelity," she murmured. "What was unbearable was that everyone kept obeying him as if nothing had happened."

At that moment Rachel caught her own reflection in the window. There were still streaks of smudged makeup around her eyes.

And she smiled.

"That's why I enjoyed so much watching that girl lose control a few minutes ago. For a second she went back to being just another hysterical mistress of a ridiculous old man."

"And the go-between?" I asked. "Wasn't there some intermediary figure between the two of them?"

Rachel shook her head with a smile; Annula's eyes seemed to light up faintly, as though my comment had illustrated her most secret thoughts.

I gathered that in these mountains even the most grotesque scandals could be told with the same composure others reserve for talking about the weather.

"How have you found Bishkek?" Jeff cut in.

"Lovely!" Anaïs said, with a radiant smile. "This morning we went to the bazaar and bought the best dried fruit I've ever tasted in my life. The dried peaches are extraordinary. I think I could live on nothing else."

Jeff adjusted his glasses with mild impatience.

"And doesn't it worry you, being so far from home?"

Anaïs let out a small laugh.

"So many people asked me exactly that question before we came. They found it inconceivable that I would temporarily leave my career at a business consulting firm in Manchester to come to Central Asia and accompany my husband. My mother, in particular, was horrified. She kept repeating that we were coming to a Muslim region, that after September eleventh these lands had become synonymous with danger for Europeans, that this was all Osama bin Laden's territory, full of religious fanatics."

Rachel burst out laughing.

"That sounds very American, coming from a Frenchwoman."

"My mother has spent too much time watching television," Anaïs replied calmly. "But the truth is that both Marco and I are deeply mystical."

Jeff raised an eyebrow.

"Mystical?"

"Yes," Anaïs answered, perfectly naturally. "Before we came I had a very clear vision. I saw myself in these lands and felt an absolute sense of calm. I knew this trip would be good for me, even necessary."

Jeff smiled ironically.

"And did the vision include Marco too?"

Anaïs looked at me for a moment, as if handing me the floor.

"Not exactly," I answered, "but difficulties don't unsettle me; if anything, as a Colombian, I think I need them."

"Don't tell us you enjoy causing trouble," Jeff said.

"I avoid it," I replied. "My specialty is enduring it, resolving it with tact. And that's because being honest in a country with so much crime is, as Hamlet says, to be one man in ten thousand. Understand that I grew up in a city where surviving each day was a small miracle, threatened by guerrilla groups, then by paramilitaries, ordinary crime, and even by the police themselves. Not even the banks or

insurance companies can be trusted; when my father went to claim an insurance payout after my grandfather's death, the legal department of Seguros Suramericana forged a document so as not to pay him."

"That sounds awful!" Annula cut in. "I thought that kind of abuse only happened in India."

There was a brief pause.

"Marco is made of tough metal," Anaïs said, taking my hands.

I watched Rachel suppress a smile.

"That sounds particularly romantic," Jeff said.

"Visions always carry a bit of romanticism," Anaïs answered calmly. "But they're only intuitions; they're not certainties. We live in an age that tries to reduce all human experience to what can be rationally measured, and yet we all keep looking for signs, coincidences, symbols. Even those who mock it end up doing it in secret."

Rachel cut in:

"That has historically been the business of every religion."

"And of politics too," Anaïs replied.

Rachel said nothing.

Anaïs went on, perfectly at ease:

"And then there's also our desire to know the world. We French grow up with a very particular awareness of our global presence. Our history is scattered across many continents. France has never been, for us, merely a European territory; it exists also in its former colonies, in its diasporas, in its shared languages, in its contradictions. That produces an almost natural curiosity about other places."

She took a sip of coffee.

"I think that's why I connected with Marco so quickly. We both feel a kind of discomfort with staying still. We like moving. Changing languages. Changing landscapes. Changing structures."

She smiled slightly.

"And I've also learned that arguing with family rarely gets you anywhere. We French prefer to avoid pointless confrontations. If someone is determined to believe the world works a certain way, it's exhausting trying to correct them. Sometimes silence is a higher form of intelligence."

Jeff seemed increasingly baffled.

Anaïs then looked toward where Weiler and Polina had disappeared.

"And this city is already offering us something fascinating."

"What exactly?" I asked.

"The chance to watch how many Westerners, far from their own countries, reveal their true nature. Here they seem to feel morally immune. Maybe because they're foreigners. Maybe because they're richer than most of the people around them. Maybe because they think no one will ever judge them."

Rachel let out a dry laugh.

"You talk as if we were living in the nineteenth century," Jeff remarked.

"Don't you like this city?" I asked him, feeling the soft evening breeze off the tundra on my face.

"I prefer Tashkent," he said. "Here you can't just go out in the middle of the night..."

"For what?" Anaïs asked, intrigued.

"To..." Jeff hesitated, glancing at Rachel, "to buy a bottle of wine, for instance."

His remark amused us; Anaïs and I kept teasing him about it the whole way home.

"That one's up to something at night," I told Anaïs slyly. "Did you notice his wife is almost twenty years older than him?"

"Rachel must be an influential woman," Anaïs mused.

Annula is an educated woman, but one whose

intellectual development ambition has stunted. She is one of those modern women who criticize knowledge by quoting the French philosophers who came after May '68, without ever daring to question them.

When I asked her whether she had Dravidian ancestry, she expounded her erudition on the history of her nation, emphasizing its connections to the Aryan race. Her elaborate explanations confirmed my deepest fears; we were in a land that ranked everyone according to their ethnic ancestry.

"You talk about suffering as though you held a monopoly on it," Annula said, fixing on me a look that was no longer cordial. "It's a curious trait in Latin Americans: they turn adversity into a moral credential."

"Nor do I believe," I replied, "and here I agree with Bernard Shaw, that suffering misfortunes is a merit in itself; but, as Nietzsche writes, it's in those wounds that the best temperaments are forged."

Rachel stopped smiling. Jeff pretended to inspect his glass.

"And what do you think you know about India?" Annula pressed. "Where do you think I come from?"

"Tell me," I said. "What part of India are you from?"

"Goa," she answered, with a slight tilt of her head. "A former Portuguese colony. A place where history is breathed in temples that coexist with every faith. My grandparents spoke Portuguese, my parents prayed in Sanskrit, and I was raised to compete in English."

"And your family?" I asked. "Were they from that India defined by caste and blood?"

"From that one, and from none," she answered. "In my house we didn't talk about castes; we simply acted according to them. And, if you want categories, yes: in my upbringing there was an insistence on lineage, on origins, on mixtures. In the West they call it 'identity'; in India it's

simply part of the family's history."

I let her continue.

"I grew up in a traditional Hindu family," she went on. "Women don't hold a prominent place there, but, precisely because of their weakness, it is they who approve or disapprove of every hierarchy. My mother did it in exemplary fashion... until"

She paused.

"When my father died, my mother began to disappear little by little... First she stopped eating with us; then she stopped speaking. Then she stopped holding herself up in the world. She died three months later. No one killed her, of course; but in our environment widowhood is an anomaly. A woman who outlives her husband is unsettling. She is looked at as though she had failed at something essential."

I thought that this form of obedience was not so far removed from the burial rites of the Bronze Age patriarch, with his women, pets, and living slaves.

"Is it true what they say about widows in India?" I asked. "That they outlive their husbands and end up being treated as though they were guilty?"

Annula did not look away.

"It's true the suspicion exists," she said. "And it's true that many women learn to disappear before that suspicion, and the aggressive questions of their relatives and neighbors, devour them."

"Such as..." Anaïs asked.

"Why did you let your husband get sick? Weren't you able to schedule him a doctor's appointment? Did you remind him to take his medicine every day? Why didn't you make time for that poor man to exercise every day?"

Anaïs squeezed my fingers under the table.

"So then," I went on, "your path was a different one?"

"I didn't have the beauty that, in my world, functions as currency," she answered, without emphasis.

"My only path was intelligence. Discipline. Consistency. I learned never to fail. Never to hesitate in public. Never to concede. Every idea had to hold up. Every intervention had to strengthen my position. If you can't rely on appearance, you have to become irrefutable."

"And you also learned to choose allies," I said.

Rachel let out a short laugh.

"I learned to choose superiors..." she corrected, glancing at Jeff and Rachel with a hint of affection.

"And to be useful to them without appearing to be," her voice finished in my mind; it was clear she had also mastered the difficult art of flattering her superiors without their noticing.

"The West offered me the independence India denied me," Annula added, "and the Soros Foundation offered me language, method, legitimacy."

"And you," Anaïs said, with that candor women still carry at twenty-seven, "gave it your unreserved loyalty in return."

Annula held her breath for a fraction of a second, but Anaïs went on, unaware of her own indiscretion.

"And did you never have to sacrifice anything?" she asked.

Annula's expression relaxed at such a flattering question.

"Every character requires decisions," she said, "and in each of them we leave half a world behind on the road."

"What worlds?" I pressed.

"Because living is also a constant failure," she answered. "Sartre explains it better: there are acts that, once carried out, establish a coherence that is no longer up for debate. You live inside them."

"I don't need Sartre to understand ethics," Anaïs said. "For me it's rather simple: either one is noble, of good intentions, or one is treacherous, of bad intentions."

Annula smiled, but there was no humor in her face.

"That simplicity is a luxury," she said. "The real world doesn't work in black and white. There are grey areas where moral categories dissolve."

"Not in everything," I countered. "I'm against the death penalty, just as I'm against abortion. If even contemporary science debates basic forms of consciousness in the tiniest organisms, it seems morally obscene to deny humanity to a human being in gestation. You should see those recent films of babies fighting, utterly defenseless, with their tiny hands, against the needles abortionists insert to destroy them."

My voice broke with emotion, leaving behind a silence that grew dense.

Rachel studied the table. Jeff cleared his throat. Anaïs did not let go of my hand.

Annula placed both palms on the table.

"You're reducing a complex decision to a convenient formula," she said. "In wartime, for instance, morality isn't an abstract choice."

"Really?" I said.

"Under the German occupation," she went on, "whole villages were forced to inform on Jews and members of the resistance. If they didn't, everyone was killed. There were no innocents in that scheme; there were only survivors. To the occupiers, the Jews were guilty because of financial propaganda; the resistance fighters, guilty of treason. Everything had its own internal logic."

"I would have died in that scenario," I said. "Wasn't it Gandhi who said there are many causes he'd be willing to die for, but none he'd be willing to kill for?"

"Being a martyr is an easy decision," she replied, "especially for someone like you, who has no children."

Anaïs stepped in, her voice seeking to mediate:

"My mother used to tell me that, in France, many people had to choose between betraying others or dying. And no one, certainly, comes out of a choice like that

unstained.”

“Precisely,” Annula said. “That’s exactly where your dichotomy breaks down.”

I watched her. Her fingers had begun to tense; her index finger tapped the table in an almost imperceptible rhythm.

“Or where responsibility begins,” I replied. “Calling everything a ‘grey area’ ends up excusing everything.”

Annula took a deep breath. Her shoulders rose slightly.

“What you call justification,” she said, weighing each word, “I call understanding human complexity.”

“Then it’s a matter of semantics,” I said.

Rachel stopped breathing for an instant.

Annula leaned toward me. Her eyes, restrained until then, lit up with a harshness she had not shown all afternoon.

“There are women who have had to have abortions rather than live as slaves their whole lives,” she said, her voice firm, defiant. “You, as a man, don’t even know from what privileges you’re speaking.”

Her jaw trembled slightly. Her breathing grew short. For the first time since we had known her, she had stopped controlling her expression.

I considered that, unless I wanted to begin my relationship with my superiors with a scene as regrettable as the one we had witnessed less than an hour earlier, I should not even concede that she was entirely right.

Jeff looked out toward the street, as though the Bishkek traffic had suddenly become urgent.

Rachel held Annula’s gaze with a half-smile, satisfied to see the crack.

No one said anything for a few seconds.

“But what a beautiful sunset!” Anaïs exclaimed, with a charming smile that put us all at ease. “I love the

architecture of that presidential palace.”

Jeff turned slowly toward the building and, for the first time all afternoon, spoke with genuine enthusiasm.

“It’s a fascinating piece of late Soviet architecture,” he said. “The interesting thing is that it tries to look light, but it was actually designed to intimidate. Look at the obsessive symmetry of the façade: everything is meant to visually diminish the individual. The columns are deliberately oversized, and those endless straight lines create the sense that the building never ends.”

We looked at the enormous white mass rising on the far side of the square, clad in pale marble, reflecting the last orange tones of the sun.

“The Soviets understood very well how to build buildings that seemed eternal,” Jeff went on. “They wanted to convey political stability even as the system was rotting from within. Look at the windows: they look small from here, but they’re actually enormous; it’s a visual trick so that citizens perceive the building as bigger than it really is.”

The fountains in front of the palace sent up perfectly synchronized jets of water, while the Kyrgyz flags fluttered under an icy wind sweeping down from the mountains.

“And yet,” Jeff continued, “the Kyrgyz added something the Soviets would never have tolerated: that visual opening toward the Tian Shan. Look behind the palace.”

We all turned.

The snow-capped peaks were beginning to take on a violet hue as the sun went down.

“That’s the only thing that saves this place from looking completely authoritarian,” Anaïs murmured.

Rachel let out a brief laugh.

“I agree with Annula that the West is the freest region on earth,” I said, my enthusiasm returning.

“I wouldn’t say that,” Annula said, spurred on in her specialty. “Western freedom has very precise limits. Let

me tell you about Mr. Jefferson.”

“We’re all ears,” Anaïs nodded.

“Mr. Jefferson was a business administration student at Indiana University. When he graduated, Mr. Jefferson sent an American multinational his résumé, printed in gold ink on the most expensive paper on the market. They called him, and he sailed through the selection process, going through various surveys and interviews; for some reason, all of them were done by phone or virtually, by email, including the discussion of his contract terms. The informal moment of his hiring happened to coincide with a board meeting of the multinational, made up of blond and Latino men. The doors then opened to let in a thin young man, thick-lipped, dark-skinned, wearing metal-framed glasses.

“The silence was so cutting that Mr. Jefferson apologized.

“‘Yes,’ he said, leaving the room. ‘My voice is a radio announcer’s voice.’”

“What happened to Mr. Jefferson?” I asked.

“He found another job,” Annula said. “Once he got it, he sued that multinational for racial discrimination.”

“And did he win?” Anaïs asked.

“Of course,” Annula nodded. “In America, almost every racism lawsuit wins.”

It was then that I noticed the growing number of foreigners in the café, most of them from embassies or non-governmental groups.

“We’re all driven by the urge to come out on top,” I remarked. “Racism is a strategy.”

“The urge to come out on top?”

“Cioran wrote an essay on the subject.”

“Cioran is an antisemite,” she replied, raising her gaze somewhere over my shoulders.

My argument was no longer up for discussion—only the record of the philosopher I had cited.

“I didn’t know that,” I said apologetically, with disbelief. “Even so, don’t you find the idea itself sound?”

“How can you support an antisemite?” she said, her voice sharpening.

“You’ve fallen into the ad hominem fallacy,” I replied. “You’re no longer arguing against the point, but against the credentials of the one making it. Your logic is invalid.”

“SEP is made up of Jews,” she argued, with the triumphant air of someone playing their trump card in a card game.

I looked at her, astonished by her stubbornness; I turned to Rachel, Anaïs, and Jeff, who watched me impassively.

“Are you the one in charge of the academic posts?” I chose to ask Jeff instead.

“Some of them,” he nodded. “In fact, we’d like to name you to the committee that will approve our next conference in Samarkand.”

“What an honor!” I said, smiling at Anaïs.

“It’s a formality!” Jeff clarified, catching our looks. “There might even be budget for your travel. You’re a communications specialist, and we’re tired of so many sociologists and anthropologists.”

“I understand,” I nodded, pleased. “One must follow the formalities, and we’ve only just arrived. It would benefit me to share my ideas on the sociology of communication. But, before I forget, allow me to ask: could you help Anaïs find an academic position in the city?”

“Classes have already started!” Jeff said, with a stern look. “It’s very hard to find work here, and if she does, they won’t pay her more than ten dollars a month.”

“That’s not what we were told,” I answered, noticing Anaïs’s uneasy expression.

“You already have your salary,” Jeff said, in a sour tone. “Anaïs should work as a volunteer, without collecting

a stipend.”

“Or be satisfied with a salary of five dollars,” Rachel finished. “That, believe me, is a great salary around here.”

“And you, with that scruffy little beard, look like a Turk!” Annula cut in, eyeing my chin. “I’d advise you to shave! Venkatesh, our English academic of Pakistani descent, had to do the same thing in Russia, because, with his prophet’s beard, he was a dead ringer for Osama bin Laden. And around here, generally speaking, people don’t care for Turks.”

“Who doesn’t care for Turks?” Anaïs asked. “The Russians or the Kyrgyz?”

“Both,” Annula answered. “Here every ethnic group despises every other. And the Turks aren’t around here on vacation. They want to revive their empire in Central Asia! Be very careful with them.”

“I have hopes that the Russian culture of Dostoevsky and Gogol will humanize this part of the world,” I answered.

“All they want is to sabotage the USA,” Annula replied. “They’re capable of poisoning a dam in Los Angeles out of sheer envy. They thought themselves the most intelligent and powerful people on earth for a couple of decades, and it was the USA that brought them back down to earth.”

4. An English Neocolonialist

Back home we ran into Dorothy, daughter of a Cambridge professor, short, with a plunging neckline and a slight squint, a sociology lecturer who also rode in horse races and played violin in the Bishkek philharmonic orchestra.

“Quite the model girl,” I said, as a compliment.

“And your husband,” Dorothy said to Anaïs, before saying goodbye, “what does he plan to do while you work out here?”

Unable to correct her, I studied her impatient face in that rarely disrupted game that is conversation.

“For the moment,” I said, with that calm the British so appreciate when they are agitated, “spoiling her with plenty of gifts. Don’t forget, mon amour, that this morning I bought you a pound of the best dried peaches in the city.”

“It’s the least he can do, for the trip he’s dragging you along on,” Dorothy replied, with a hint of envy.

“Besides, I like to cook,” I went on, “and I’m the one who sweeps and mops the house.”

“Latinos are good at that,” Dorothy said, with a delighted smile.

“But the bathrooms and the laundry are Anaïs’s department.”

I savored the gap between her inquisitive eyes and the clarification we were obliged to give.

“Marco is the professor who was hired,” Anaïs clarified. “He’s the one who speaks Russian almost perfectly.”

“Вы говорите по-русски?” Dorothy asked, with a hint of disbelief, clumsily masking her prejudices about my position.

“К сожалению, немного. Я должен пройти

промежуточный курс.”

“Для чего?”

“Хочу прочитать Чехова и Достоевского.”

“I’m the one without a job,” Anaïs cut in.

“Oh!” Dorothy exclaimed, and, stammering, added with a foolishness that made her lose all composure, “I thought your husband would be teaching Spanish!”

Dorothy let out a few guttural sounds she couldn’t quite control, and her cheeks flushed like a maiden reaching her first climax. I thought of *The Story of O*, in which a man demonstrates the closeness between pleasure and pain. Might the same hold between honor and shame?

Wasn’t Dorothy supposed—as Rachel would argue weeks later—to be, after all, a sociologist devoted to exposing the prejudices of less developed nations? A heroine cut from the same cloth as Electra, Cleopatra, Joan of Arc, or any of those fierce women who died for their rights?

Those musings would resurface the afternoon I annoyed Rachel over the phone, telling her how Dorothy had decided my brown skin could only mean I was destined to be a Spanish teacher for immigrants.

We agreed to meet one November afternoon in 2002, and while I waited, the café smelled of freshly ground coffee and unkept promises.

Rachel arrived an hour late, and we sat by the heated window, at the metal table where we had talked months before, now covered in snow.

“You should read her before you judge her so quickly,” she told me as I sat down, sliding several printed pages across the wood. “She’s one of the most promising young academics we have here.”

“I don’t doubt that if I were Colombian and dark-skinned like myself, her story would have been quite different.”

Rachel let out a hearty laugh.

“That’s exactly why I want to know what you think of her work.”

I read those texts over several days, through the freezing winter afternoons of 2002, in the quiet of my study. I came back to the café with the articles covered in marginal notes, underlines, and question marks that seemed to swarm like ants between the academic lines.

“I have to admit it’s brilliant,” I told her, stacking the papers on the table.

Rachel smiled with the satisfaction of someone winning a silent bet.

“I knew it.”

“Though deeply contradictory.”

“And I was told you have a way of thinking that contradicts everything.”

I pulled out the first article, the one I had read with particular attention during my stay in Bishkek, when, out of curiosity—or because they wanted me to appreciate Dorothy’s excellence—I had been sent several links.

“Here she argues that, contrary to what much of the Western press claims, the Kyrgyz have managed to coexist with the population of Russian descent without developing the aggressive ethnic nationalism seen in other post-Soviet republics. She writes about the prejudices Russians suffered at the hands of the locals, and her thesis is that the Kyrgyz had found a way to get along with their colleagues of Russian descent because they hadn’t developed as much nationalism as in other regions. It’s a fairly sharp thesis.”

Rachel nodded as she stirred her coffee.

“It is. It was her breakthrough piece, so to speak.”

I picked up another document, the one that had unsettled me the most.

“Then there’s this one about Electra. Here she talks about a woman capable of confronting the maternal inheritance... or rather, the patriarchal inheritance disguised as maternal lineage. It’s a very interesting article,

one that strips away all the inherited prejudices taught in school, in church, the prejudices about who truly counts as a social mother.”

“One of her most cited pieces,” Rachel replied. “Last year it was used as a reference at a gender studies conference at Cambridge.”

I picked up the next article, the one where my disagreement began to ferment.

“Then she turns Cleopatra into something more than a seductive queen. She presents her as an educated woman, with a sexual freedom she wielded as a weapon, even capable of getting pregnant on her own terms. You say that today’s women who choose to have children outside marriage, lesbian couples... are the modern Cleopatras.”

Rachel nodded again, this time with a slowness that seemed like deliberation.

“It’s a provocative reading, but it has historical grounding.”

“And wait,” I said, picking up the last article. “Now we get to Joan of Arc.”

I mentioned then what bothered me: according to Dorothy, the Maid of Orléans was a woman who knew how to manipulate her people’s religion to her advantage, exploiting others’ prejudices and superstitions to mobilize armies. A woman who understood how to weaponize popular faith for her own cause.

Rachel drank her coffee slowly, letting the silence do its work.

“I disagree, deeply,” I finished. “It strikes me as an excessively cynical reading. Joan died for her convictions, not out of political calculation.”

“But it’s provocative,” Rachel replied, and in her tone there was neither defense nor attack, only acknowledgment.

I watched her in silence. That woman who so

sharply analyzed the prejudices of entire nations—Electra as an emblem of rebellion against patriarchy, Cleopatra as a symbol of female autonomy, Joan as a strategist of popular faith—was the same one who, months before, had looked at me with that condescending smile, certain she knew who I was just from the color of my face.

“All of that makes it even more baffling,” I said, finally. “Such a brilliant woman, diagnosing prejudice, power, female rebellion... and yet she assumed, from my appearance and my birthplace, that I could only be the lover of a French academic. Do you still think she’s an amazon?”

Rachel set her cup down on the table.

“Academics,” she said, with a slow, almost melancholic smile, “tend to diagnose the moral illnesses of entire civilizations with great precision. Their own pathologies are much harder for them to spot.”

I pictured Dorothy somewhere in Cambridge, perhaps in her office cluttered with books, correcting some article on the postcolonial gaze. Her expression, could she see me now, discussing her texts with Rachel...

That unease, however, would have lasted only a few seconds on her face. Drawing on her English pragmatism, she would have hidden her humanity behind a spontaneous smile.

“What was a neocolonial prejudice, against her promising academic career, when weighed against a third-worlder?” she seemed to tell herself.

Rachel watched me closely.

“Are you going to respond to her?” she asked.

“Respond to what?”

“To her article. The one about prejudices. I imagine you’ll refute her, reframe her thesis on Joan of Arc...”

I thought of Bishkek, of those links I’d been sent, of the freezing afternoons reading Dorothy before I had even met her. I thought of her certainty and my silence. I

thought of Electra, Cleopatra, and Joan, those fierce women who fought and died for their rights—except perhaps Joan, who, according to Dorothy, had fought for something else entirely.

“These academic articles are born condemned by fashion,” I answered finally, stacking the articles back up. “In two years they’re already history and no one remembers them. Let her discover her own contradictions on her own. Either way, I’ll dedicate a chapter to her in one of my novels.”

Rachel’s smile turned sour; she knew my promise extended to her and her husband as well.

Let us return to that summer afternoon in 2002.

The look on Dorothy’s face when she discovered I was the international academic SEP had hired to teach at the American University of Kyrgyzstan was that of a chess grandmaster who has just realized she has moved her queen into an unsalvageable position. That unease, however, lasted only a few seconds. Drawing on her English pragmatism, she hid her humanity behind a spontaneous smile. “What was a neocolonial prejudice, against her promising academic career, when weighed against a third-worlder?” she seemed to tell herself.

I sensed she would do everything she could to stay out of our lives.

“Why don’t you come have dinner at our apartment tonight?” I invited her, with a generosity that only offended her further.

“No, thank you,” she backed away. “I need to prepare my course.”

“We’ve just come from England,” I insisted, “and since you’re from Oxford, we’d like to share our impressions.”

“There’s not much to talk about,” she answered evasively. “The people here have been wonderful to me.”

“How about tomorrow, then?” I said.

“I can’t.”

“Any other day...”

“I’m sorry,” she said, her squinting eyes shifting.

It was clear I was no longer speaking with a fifty-something academic of the caliber of my Manchester colleagues, but with an impostor who had unmasked herself. I sensed as much in conversations where recent Oxford graduates voiced their frustration at Indians who, fresh out of one of their programs, secured the scholarships Anglo-Saxon institutions had designed—so they would say, placing pedigree above merit—for their own nationals. I would later confirm, judging by her circle of friends or court of admirers, that, despite Bishkek’s ethnic diversity, nearly all her followers were of Slavic descent.

Months later I would gather that her popularity did not spring solely from her charisma. In a society obsessed with social mobility, Dorothy represented a door into England: the university where she and her parents had studied stood as a possible escape route for those who dreamed of leaving Central Asia. The Europeans promised a better life; the Americans, a perfect one. Many sought her friendship; others dreamed of becoming her partner and leaving the country by her side.

The most admired man at the university had tried to win her over, but Dorothy seemed too clever to give herself entirely to any one person. She preferred something more profitable: to be desired by everyone without belonging entirely to anyone.

During one of my later trips to the Issyk-Kul resort, a colleague told me a story that had quietly fed her legend. After a dinner soaked in too much wine, Dorothy had begun behaving unusually affectionately toward one of the department’s most beautiful Kyrgyz professors: stroking her hair, wrapping an arm around her waist, whispering in her ear with an intimacy that made several people uncomfortable. Eyebrows rose around the table.

Even so, the scene went no further. The next day no one mentioned it openly again, and the episode was filed away as one more drunken eccentricity within Dorothy's private mythology, whose affection for her most beautiful students and colleagues always seemed to skirt a deliberately ambiguous line.

Intrigued by that story, some time later I brought up the rumor in another private conversation and asked her directly about her position on the Valentino Smith scandal, a professor accused of having had a relationship with one of his students and of having used his academic position for sexual ends.

To my surprise, Dorothy answered with absolute coldness that she had kept out of the whole process. The university had even asked her to join the disciplinary committee reviewing the case, and Valentino himself—with whom she was on cordial terms—had personally begged her to accept, trusting that, as one of the few respected foreigners within the institution, her presence might help balance the proceedings.

Dorothy refused; she did not want to defend him. Nor did she want to condemn him publicly. She simply let him fall.

Valentino ended up leaving the university amid the scandal, and Dorothy's refusal was read by many as proof of her integrity. The rumors about her own emotional ambiguity dispersed almost immediately. Once again she had protected her reputation with admirable coldness. I understood then that Dorothy possessed the political instinct of those who never let themselves be dragged into a lost cause.

"Dorothy is extremely popular!" Annula would tell me days later. "She gets dinner invitations from the country's most influential families and has been courted by the most handsome, wealthiest young men in Kyrgyzstan. Of course, none of them managed to capture her heart."

"I don't doubt it."

I already suspected that Dorothy's prejudices had less to do with my nationality than with the tan of my skin.

"I promise you that, in exchange, we'll forget this faux pas," I said, in my best English-accented French.

Dorothy looked at me with the surprise so many xenophobes display upon discovering the existence of Latin Americans, so often written off, capable of expressing themselves in several languages.

"So you're the one who taught them French?" she asked Anaïs. "I hope he's compensating you well for your lessons."

"My marquis is self-taught," my wife answered, unamused by her sense of humor. "We speak English at home."

"I have to go," Dorothy replied, glancing first at her watch, then at Anaïs with a look of disapproval.

And, without turning to say goodbye, she left.

We went to the most modern supermarket in the city, where we bought groceries and household items for the apartment.

"Here are the moisturizing creams Michelle suggested you bring on the plane," I remarked sourly, seeing a shelf stocked with that very product, "and at the same price as in France."

Anaïs looked at me, embarrassed.

"She must have told you we were headed to the Sahara," I joked, "and that a year without moisturizer would age you ten years."

Anaïs did not find my comment amusing; if there was one thing she could not bring herself to oppose, it was one of Michelle's fixed ideas, however absurd.

"You insisted far too much on inviting Dorothy to dinner," Anaïs scolded me on the way home with the groceries, in a Lada taxi. "People will say she fancies you."

"I was afraid you'd say that," I answered. "I did it to unsettle her."

"What's your interest in her?"

"Correcting her xenophobia."

"Your arrival certainly seemed to offend her," Anaïs said, nodding.

"I think, rather, she offended herself," I replied. "I wanted to show her we wouldn't make a fuss about what happened. But her refusal shows she won't let go of her prejudices. How does that old Greek proverb go? Those who have once looked down on us will never think well of us again."

"The Greeks never knew forgiveness the way we do," Anaïs remarked.

"Don't forget, we're on Tamerlane's lands now."

That scene with Dorothy was not the first time Anaïs had reacted with jealousy toward another woman. Back in Portugal, during one of our first months living together, she had burst into tears over a reason that struck me as absurd at the time and that I came to understand better with time.

We had eaten dinner in silence in our small Porto apartment. Outside it rained with that unending Atlantic monotony. I was correcting some texts when Anaïs, who had been watching me from the sofa for several minutes, set her wine glass down on the table and asked me, with a calm that alarmed me more than any shout would have:

"How many women friends do you still write to?"

I looked up, not understanding.

"What do you mean?"

"Your women friends," she insisted. "The women you correspond with, call now and then, or who resurface every few months. I've counted at least a dozen."

I smiled, in disbelief.

"That sounds exaggerated."

"Exaggerated?" she said, holding back tears. "Do I correspond with old boyfriends? Do I call men I once had an emotional closeness with? I don't, because I know it

would bother you. Have you ever wondered whether I'm happy with that situation?"

I watched her in silence. What was in her face was not anger, but fear.

"Anaïs..."

"From the moment I met you I knew you were one of the most popular men at your university," she went on. "There were always women orbiting around you. Being with you was a fight I won, and I'm very happy with you, but I also expected certain friendships to fade with time."

I moved closer, slowly.

"My love, many of those friendships are exactly what helped us build our life. Wasn't it Mónica who helped you get that scholarship that let you come to England? Wasn't it thanks to her that I was later able to come too?"

Anaïs wiped away her tears.

"I know."

"And you know perfectly well that I never had anything with Mónica. She had her own life."

Anaïs lowered her head.

"Yes... I know."

She stayed silent for a few seconds before hugging me.

"Forgive me," she whispered. "Sometimes I feel the world could offer you better women than me, just as my father wanted a better daughter than me..."

I held her without answering right away. In that moment I read her words as a passing insecurity, but behind them lived a much older fear: the terror of being abandoned without explanation, exactly as she would go on to tell me.

We stayed embraced for a long while, before the mist of the Douro lit by occasional flashes of lightning. The rain beat against the windows with an almost hypnotic persistence. I thought she had finally calmed down, but I felt her breath grow agitated against my chest once more.

"My father did something terrible to me," she

murmured.

I raised myself up slowly.

“What happened?”

Anaïs stared at the wall for a few seconds.

“One day he simply left.”

I did not understand right away.

“What do you mean, he left?”

“He left the house. He walked out like any other morning and never came back.”

I watched her in silence.

“He never came back?”

She shook her head.

“He never explained anything. Never gave me a reason. Never told me whether I had done something wrong.”

Her voice began to break.

“For years I thought he had abandoned me because of something I’d done. Children always believe they’re responsible for everything. If their parents separate, they think it’s because of something they did. I spent years wondering what I had done wrong for my father to decide to disappear.”

I held her tighter.

“It wasn’t your fault.”

“I know that, rationally,” she answered. “But there are things a little girl doesn’t get over with arguments.”

She fell silent before going on.

“And then another problem came along.”

“Your mother?”

Anaïs nodded slowly.

“My mother discovered very early that that guilt made her powerful. She never told me directly, but she always knew how to use my fear of losing her. If I drifted too far away, she’d cry. If I made a decision she didn’t like, she’d fall ill. If I tried to become emotionally independent, she’d remind me of everything she’d suffered alone.”

She took a deep breath.

“And I always ended up giving in.”

“Always?”

A bitter smile crossed her face.

“Not always. I learned to rebel... but quietly.”

I watched her, intrigued.

“How?”

For the first time, she smiled with a slight mischief.

“My mother wanted me to study psychology in France,” she went on. “Education was practically free, and she kept saying it would be absurd to waste that privilege.”

“And you?”

Anaïs smiled with a mix of embarrassment and pride.

“I decided to take my revenge, elegantly.”

I watched her, amused.

“That sounds dangerous.”

“It was, for her finances.”

She let out a small laugh.

“I deliberately looked for a university with agreements with the United States. I wanted to study at an international institution, expensive, pretentious, exactly the kind of place my mother considered unnecessary. I ended up enrolling at Temple University.”

“Just to irritate her?”

“At first, yes,” she answered, with brutal honesty. “Later I ended up enjoying it.”

She settled against my chest.

“By then my mother had completely rebuilt her life. She married Groumont, a man much older than her, manager of a tourist transport company that actually belonged to his father-in-law. She married for money, and they both knew it perfectly well. He would later divorce his wife, shrewdly accusing her of adultery, and would find, in my mother, a second wife much younger than himself; that’s how she secured her financial stability. It was an elegant arrangement.”

"And were they happy?"

Anaïs let out a dry laugh.

"My mother is never happy. She's satisfied when she's in control."

She fell silent before continuing.

"Michelle turned that new financial stability into a small personal kingdom. She ran the house, Groumont, my brother, and me, with an absolutely French, authoritarian sweetness. She never shouted. She never lost her composure. She simply imposed her will with fragile glances."

I watched her in silence.

"And she's never liked me," I said.

Anaïs looked up.

"You're being unfair to her," Anaïs replied. "She's always been cordial with you."

"You just told me how she knows how to dominate people with good manners."

I couldn't help laughing.

"She blames you, it's true, for taking me away from her. She wanted me to live nearby, to visit her constantly, to keep orbiting her life. And she thinks I'm so sweet and naïve that she's convinced herself it was you who upended her plan."

Her face darkened again.

"And that's why you call her two or three times a week."

"Yes."

"It's ruining us; it's five hundred dollars."

"I know."

"The phone bills add up to the entire rent for the apartment, and it's been almost two years now. Twelve thousand dollars! Without those calls we would have already paid off all our debts."

Anaïs closed her eyes.

"I'm sorry, but... I can't leave her."

Her voice broke again.

"Even if she keeps repeating to me: 'When are you two going to get your life in order? When are you going to unpack your bags? When are you going to own property? When are you going to live like adults?'"

She shook her head slowly.

"I'm already twenty-seven, and she makes me feel like a failure. But she's my mother, and I love her!"

I held her tightly, not daring to ask whether she loved her more than me. Anaïs looked up.

"With you, for the first time, I feel my plans are truly mine, not the ones others design for me."

Back home, we made up our bed on a double mattress with fabrics of different colors; we set dried fruit around it and perfumed it with Eastern incense, which I lit with a candle. I drew back the curtains facing the main street and set a lamp on either side of us. We held each other beneath the full moon watching over the city.

For several minutes we stayed silent, gazing at Bishkek's grey buildings, softened by the moonlight. From our window we could still see a few Lada taxis crossing the main avenue slowly, and young couples heading home from their evening dinners.

"Sometimes I think this city could do us a lot of good," Anaïs whispered, "and other times, exactly the opposite."

She smiled wearily.

"But you know you're going to be fine."

"I even thought today about going back to France."

I looked up.

"Really?"

"For not being appreciated," she answered. "I mean, by Rachel and by Jeff; for that feeling of always starting from zero."

"Dorothy appreciated you more than she should have," I joked.

She laughed and fell silent for a few seconds.
“I don’t want to become a woman who just follows her husband around the world like a housewife.”

I watched her in silence.
“You know I’m the one who handles the cleaning.”
“And I don’t want to end up resembling my mother either,” she said.

“You’re the opposite of her,” I sighed, sensing she was approaching one of those states no comfort could soothe once the mounting distress took hold.

“Jeff was cruel to me,” she told me, tears in her eyes. “I don’t want to stay here without a job, like in Portugal.”

“Don’t cry!” I consoled her, holding her beneath the sheets. “They wanted to scare you! You’re a professor educated in the United States! They’ll fight over hiring you!”

“Really?”
“Believe me,” I said, watching her eyes.
“But I left my diplomas in Besançon,” she told me, holding back her distress.

“How many times did I insist you bring them?” I nodded, stroking her cheek.

“I should have listened to you,” she sobbed, holding me. “Since I don’t even have a master’s, I figured my bachelor’s degree wouldn’t be worth anything here.”

“It’s a valid degree in both France and the United States,” I went on, “and both nations carry weight in a region tyrannized by the Russians.”

“Dorothy gave us a fine example of that.”
Sensing Anaïs was about to break into tears, I kissed her gently.

“Bring some dried peaches,” I told her. “They’re in the bottom drawer of the main cabinet in the living room.”

She got up, her bare body on display; I sat and watched her, pleased, through the open door.

Opening the drawer, she took out an envelope, opened it, and jumped up excitedly, again and again.

“I don’t know what I’d do without you!” Anaïs burst into tears.

“You know me by now,” I announced, smiling. “I’m careful, and I took the trouble to pack them.”

“Thank you!” Anaïs exclaimed, her lips parting into a heartwarming smile.

“And your certificates are in the laptop bag...”
Since childhood I had learned that small oversights tend to turn into enormous catastrophes.

Before leaving France I had insisted several times that Anaïs pack her diplomas.

“Don’t exaggerate,” she had answered, filling the suitcase with cosmetics, medicines, and the moisturizing creams Michelle had suggested. “There’s no more room.”

“Your diplomas matter more than twenty bottles of cream.”

Anaïs had laughed.
“We’re going to a dangerous region. My mother insists there are no reliable medicines there, that we could fall seriously ill, that we won’t even be able to find basic goods.”

“We’re going to Bishkek, not to the Osama bin Laden cave your mother keeps talking about,” I had answered.

Anaïs had shrugged with that very French gesture she used to close out lost arguments.

While she finished organizing perfumes, moisturizers, and medicines we would never use, I had quietly taken her diplomas and slipped them into the inner pockets of the main suitcase, along with her academic certificates.

Anaïs ran to my study and came back with them, smiling without laughing, the way she always did when she was truly happy.

I refrained from voicing the dark premonition that

gnawed at me, so as not to spoil the night: that Jeff had grown irritated with me for asking him a favor right when he was offering me a perk. He had wanted to impress me, and I had tried to take advantage of his effort, a bold move that, far from impressing him, had put him off; only that could explain his cruelty toward Anaïs.

"Tomorrow we'll speak with the University president," I told her, holding her close.

And as I kissed her, the moonlight lit up her eyes.

5. Illness and Agony

Dinner with Mirbek was one of those efforts at civilization, as necessary as it was futile, that expatriates organize to regain some sense of control over their lives in a land not their own.

We had been settled in Bishkek only a few days, and the apartment facing Chuy Avenue was beginning to reveal its true nature: it was enormous, disproportionate for two people, with five useless rooms, high ceilings, pipes that groaned in the small hours, and poorly sealed windows through which a layer of grey dust crept in every morning, seeming to come not just from the city traffic but from decades of Soviet neglect. I swept and mopped three times a week, and yet it took no more than running a finger over any piece of furniture to find that same earthy film covering everything again, like invisible ash.

That afternoon we tried to tame that hostile space for a few hours. Anaïs spread a red tablecloth over the main table and set out the cutlery with almost ceremonial precision. I made spaghetti bolognese with ingredients bought at the bazaar: meat whose origin I preferred not to investigate, overripe tomatoes, and a parmesan cheese we had brought from France as if it were a relic. I also set out on the table several raw chili peppers I had found at the market, the sight of which stirred an immediate wave of nostalgia for Colombia.

Mirbek arrived on time, carrying a bottle of Georgian wine and the nervous enthusiasm of someone eager to please without seeming servile.

While uncorking a bottle of rosé and pouring it as an aperitif, Mirbek toured the apartment with genuine curiosity about my books in various languages, and praised, with that familiar mix of admiration and resentment so many locals reserved for foreigners, the size of the home

he himself had chosen to house us in.

"Foreigners always get the best apartments."

"The best apartments from 1954," I answered, pouring the wine.

Anaïs appeared from the kitchen with a tired but radiant smile.

"And even so, next to Marco I feel like I'm in Paris."

Mirbek tried the spaghetti and, upon discovering the parmesan cheese, opened his eyes in genuine fascination.

"What an extraordinary cheese! I've never tasted anything like it."

"It's Italian," I answered.

"Europe makes wonderful things," he said, with an involuntarily comic solemnity.

His gaze then landed on the chili peppers.

"Do you people eat these just like that?"

"Colombians do," Anaïs answered. "I wouldn't recommend it for you."

"If Marco does it, I can too."

"Try just the skin," I warned him. "The seeds are the strongest part."

Mirbek bit the tip of the pepper cautiously, and for a few seconds believed he had passed the test.

"Not bad," he said proudly.

Anaïs and I exchanged a silent glance. Without waiting for our reaction, he took a second, much deeper bite, crushing several seeds. His face froze for a few seconds, as though his nervous system were trying to grasp the scale of the assault, and then he began gasping, desperately searching for anything to douse the fire consuming his mouth.

"What the hell is this?"

He grabbed a big forkful of spaghetti and shoved it into his mouth.

"Don't eat pasta!" I shouted between fits of laughter. "That doesn't help!"

"My tongue is on fire!"

He grabbed the bottle of Italian rosé and started drinking straight from it while Anaïs doubled over laughing.

"We warned you."

When he finally managed to catch his breath, he pointed to the small statue of Our Lady of Fátima we had set on an improvised shelf.

"Do you people really kneel down and pray to those images?"

I uncorked the Georgian wine and poured two glasses.

"We believe in what it represents," Anaïs answered calmly.

Mirbek studied the image with a mix of anthropological curiosity and genuine bewilderment.

"We were raised to think all religion was a form of historical backwardness. From childhood we were taught that all consciousness came exclusively from material processes. The brain produces thought the way the liver produces bile."

"Rather an unpleasant metaphor," I replied.

"But efficient. In the Soviet Union, efficiency mattered more than beauty."

"And yet plenty of people still believe in witchcraft," I countered.

Mirbek let out a short laugh.

"That's true too."

Anaïs, sensing the conversation might veer into dangerous territory, cautiously stepped in.

"I also had a secular upbringing in France," she said, "and I would have stayed an atheist my whole life, if Marco hadn't taken me to Fátima. There I had an experience that moved my heart, as though something dormant had woken up, full of joy..."

"God meeting his lost soul," I added. "But let's not dwell on the topic; the travel guides warn that in Central Asia one should never discuss religion or politics."

Mirbek looked at me with a mischievous smile.

"But you don't seem to take the advice of those travel guides very seriously."

I drank slowly from the Georgian wine before answering, since that question struck me as deeper than he probably realized.

"Because it has always struck me as a profoundly anti-democratic phrase. Aristotle said man was a political animal precisely because public discussion distinguished the citizen from the slave. The slave was not permitted to deliberate on the affairs of the polis; he simply obeyed. Something similar happens today, though in a more sophisticated form. We're told to work, to consume, to travel, to accumulate shallow experiences, but never to seriously discuss the structures that organize our lives. Those modern travel guides are little manuals for manufacturing docile consumers."

Anaïs smiled with resignation.

"My husband ruins a lot of dinners this way."

"Au contraire!" I answered. "I try to save them from tedium."

The wine was slowly starting to take effect on Mirbek. His body relaxed little by little, and that almost military stiffness with which he had arrived at the apartment began to give way to a far more dangerous sincerity. As often happens with men shaped by authoritarian systems, the more his posture loosened, the less careful his tongue became.

"In our Soviet schools they taught us advanced mathematics from a very young age. Physics, chemistry, Russian literature, basic military training, and mandatory chess tournaments. The goal was to produce citizens capable of competing with the United States. The problem

was that we were taught to think inside an ideological prison. We could solve complex equations, but we couldn't ask why our neighbors disappeared."

He fell silent for a few seconds before pouring himself another glass.

"My maternal grandfather was denounced by a coworker for telling a joke about Joseph Stalin. He lost his job for years."

Anaïs slowly set her glass down on the table.

"And people still miss that system, even so?"

"Many do. Because there was also order, free education, hospitals, and stability. Now we have corruption, oligarchs, and foreigners who arrive thinking they're saviors."

"That describes plenty of Western democracies fairly well too," I answered.

Mirbek pointed a finger at me and smiled with a mix of fondness and alarm.

"That's why you're going to have problems here."

"For thinking?"

"For saying out loud what others prefer to keep quiet."

Anaïs, who knew all too well my talent for turning any dinner into a seminar on the decline of civilizations, decided to intervene before the discussion could go any further, and pulled out our new chess set.

"Why don't the two of you play your first game instead?"

Mirbek accepted at once. For the first hour he played with remarkable brilliance and forced me to defend with extreme caution. However, as the night wore on and the bottle emptied, his moves began to grow reckless. He first lost a rook out of overconfidence, then absurdly sacrificed his queen.

Around ten o'clock he offered a draw with diplomatic solemnity. I told him I would not accept it and, after studying the board for several minutes, he finally

toppled his king with a resigned smile.

I walked him to the door. Before leaving he took my arm and lowered his voice, as though he feared even these Soviet walls might be listening.

"There's something I have to tell you. If you have problems with your dean, none of us will be able to help you."

"I can defend myself," I answered.

A violent cough interrupted my sentence and forced me to bend forward. Mirbek looked at me strangely, said goodbye with a hug, and went down the stairs.

When I closed the door I found Anaïs leaning against the corridor wall. Her face had lost all color, and she was trembling in a strange way. When I asked if she was all right, it took her several seconds to answer.

She simply said she was cold.

That answer unsettled me, since the August heat was still stifling even at that hour. When I brought my hand to her forehead I understood something far more serious had just begun.

I put Anaïs to bed, thinking it was a passing episode. I made her hot tea, gave her two tablets of Antigrippin, which we had been told to take for any illness at the university, and opened the apartment windows, hoping the night air would dispel that sudden fever. Bishkek, however, seemed designed to sabotage any human attempt at rest. From Chuy Avenue rose a constant noise of cars, honking horns, and old engines that never let up, not even at dawn. Add to that the metallic groaning of the building's pipes, the distant barking of stray dogs, and the intermittent sound of an elevator that seemed to drag half a century's worth of Soviet fatigue along its cables.

Anaïs finally managed to fall asleep around one in the morning. Her breathing was still irregular, but the fever seemed to have dropped slightly. I stayed awake reading some university documents, trying to convince myself that

all of this was simply the result of exhaustion from the past few weeks. We had changed continents, languages, and university systems in a matter of days; it made sense the body would protest.

Around three in the morning I felt the first cramp.

It was a dry, brief jab, almost insignificant. I got up with the calm of someone who believes he is only dealing with simple indigestion, brought on by the wine or the bazaar meat. I walked to the bathroom, and no sooner had I closed the door than I understood how deeply wrong I was.

The spasms began multiplying with a humiliating violence. For several minutes I stayed bent over the toilet, sweating profusely, feeling my body trying to expel everything I had eaten over the last few days. When I finally managed to straighten up, I caught my reflection in the mirror: my face was ashen and my eyes sunken, like someone who had aged several years in less than an hour.

I made my way back to the bedroom with the clumsiness of an old man and found Anaïs sitting up on the bed.

"Are you all right?" she asked, in a weak voice.

Before I could answer I had to rush back to the bathroom.

She followed me there a few seconds later and leaned over the sink, retching with a violence I had never seen in her. We looked at each other for a few seconds in that grotesque scene: I clinging to the toilet, she clutching the sink, both of us half-dressed and utterly defeated by something we still did not understand.

Despite the pain, we ended up laughing.

It was a nervous laugh, almost hysterical, the kind two people share when they still cling to the illusion that the situation is temporary.

"It must have been the meat," Anaïs murmured.

"Or the wine."

"Or Mirbek?" I said, recalling stories of poisonings

from the Soviet era.

"If we die, I don't think we can hold him legally responsible," Anaïs joked. "We'd be back in the Creator's arms."

We laughed at the flights of our imagination, the way early Christians must have laughed while waiting in the antechamber of the Roman circus, before being devoured by lions.

We went back to bed near dawn, convinced the worst was over. We slept barely an hour before the spasms returned with far greater intensity.

The rest of the morning passed in a humiliating choreography around the apartment's only working bathroom. As soon as one of us managed to get back to bed, the other would run desperately for the toilet. There were moments when we both needed it at once and had to negotiate priority with the desperation of refugees in wartime. Anaïs vomited without pause; I suffered such violent diarrhea that I began to seriously worry about dehydration.

I tried to make plain white rice, but the mere smell of the boiling water gave me unbearable nausea. I ended up sitting on the kitchen floor, watching the pot boil over while I felt the room slowly spinning around me.

By mid-afternoon we decided to call some colleagues from the university. That was Bishkek's first great lesson: the people who, during the welcome cocktail parties, had promised to help us with anything, vanished with admirable efficiency the moment a real difficulty appeared.

Jeff did not answer.

Dorothy promised to call back later and never did.

Rachel recommended we drink more water and rest.

Annula, with extraordinary indifference, reminded us that we supposedly had international insurance that

would let us be flown to German hospitals in case of an emergency, as though two people unable to leave the bathroom were in any condition to organize a medical flight to Western Europe.

Anaïs hung up the phone and burst into tears.

"We're going to die here."

I tried to reassure her, though by then I myself was beginning to consider that possibility with growing seriousness. The fever had returned, the abdominal pain was increasing, and neither of us could keep any food down.

We took more Antigrippin. The drug produced a strange effect: instead of relieving us, it plunged us into a heavy, artificial sleep of nearly twelve hours. We would wake briefly to run to the bathroom, drink water, and collapse back onto the bed with the sense of having swallowed some experimental sedative designed by Soviet pharmacologists to treat depression.

By nightfall of the following day we managed to get up and walk around the apartment with something resembling dignity. I even began to believe the crisis was starting to pass.

That illusion lasted exactly forty minutes.

Anaïs collapsed in the hallway on her way to the bathroom. I ran to catch her, but the effort brought on such a brutal spasm that I ended up kneeling beside her, unable to help. We stayed lying on the cold floor for several minutes, listening to the cars on Chuy Avenue and silently wondering how an entire city could keep functioning with such absolute normalcy while our small universe collapsed behind a closed door.

The next morning found us alive, which by then already seemed like a statistical victory. Still, it only took an attempt to sit up to understand that the illness was barely entering a crueler, more sophisticated phase. During the first forty-eight hours the body had reacted with visible violence—vomiting, diarrhea, fever, spasms—but now a

quieter, and for that very reason more frightening, wearing-down was setting in: an extreme weakness that turned any movement into a heroic task.

I tried to get up to make breakfast and took almost five minutes to get from the bed to the kitchen. My legs shook as though I had just run a marathon, and the simple act of opening the refrigerator brought on such severe dizziness that I had to lean against the wall. Inside the refrigerator there were only a few tomatoes, some cooked rice, yogurt, mineral water, and a wretched scrap of meat neither of us would ever touch again. The very smell of food had begun to disgust me. I made tea and toast, but Anaïs vomited the moment she tried a bite of bread.

I watched her with growing concern. Her face, usually so radiant, was taking on a greyish tone I had never seen on her. Her lips were cracked, her eyes sunken, and there was a physical frailty that clashed brutally with the confident, elegant woman who, only a few days earlier, had argued with Rachel and Dorothy at the university. Suddenly she looked like a little girl lost on the wrong continent.

"We have to go to a hospital," she murmured.

"We can't even make it down the stairs. Maybe a doctor..."

"Then let's call someone."

We tried again, and once more confirmed that the prestigious international ecosystem surrounding us was made up of individuals extraordinarily sensitive at multicultural cocktail parties and extraordinarily useless in the face of any real crisis.

Jeff recommended we rest more.

"We could fly you out to a hospital in Frankfurt at any moment," he said. "But in that case, we wouldn't be able to take you back in Bishkek. So, unless it's genuinely a matter of life or death, I'd advise you to rest and take it easy. What you have is a virus; we all go through that

adjustment process to the climate and Kyrgyz food."

Sultan, who was with him, suggested it was probably just seasonal flu.

I called Annula and asked for a doctor, but she told me our case did not warrant one; when I argued that we needed to see someone, she insisted, with impeccable bureaucratic coldness, that we had international policies that, in a serious case, could transfer us to German clinics.

"Wonderful," I said after hanging up. "We'll die in German."

Anaïs tried to laugh, but ended up crying.

Rachel sent us several boxes of antibiotics and Antigrippin with Mirbek, who handed them to me wearing a face mask, in a hurried goodbye. It summed up rather well the university's spirit of solidarity: they could toss medicine at us the way one feeds caged animals, while carefully avoiding any human contact with someone else's suffering.

The virus slowly mutated. The diarrhea and vomiting began to subside, but were replaced by an endless phlegm, an intermittent fever, and a sore throat that made me feel as though I had swallowed shards of glass. The Soviet medicines managed to hold some symptoms momentarily at bay, but exacted a strange psychological toll: they plunged us into a heavy, viscous, almost chemical sleep, from which we would wake with no clear sense of whether we had rested or simply been temporarily suspended from consciousness.

Our existence then took on a grotesque regularity. In the morning we dressed like respectable professors and went to the university, feigning a health we did not have; in the afternoon we came staggering back to the apartment and collapsed, still dressed, onto the bed, without even the strength to take off our shoes. We slept ten or twelve hours straight and still woke with the sense of having sunk into ever deeper regions of exhaustion.

It was during one of those Antigrippin-induced

nap that I had my first truly disturbing hallucination.

I dreamed I was walking across a vast medieval plain covered in fog. In the distance rose a black stone castle, surrounded by mountains that vaguely resembled those of Kyrgyzstan; its architecture echoed that of the late-medieval Turkish palaces. On one of the towers I made out a princess dressed in white, screaming my name in desperation. As I drew closer, I already knew that princess was Anaïs.

I tried to run toward her, but a gigantic creature descended from the clouds. It was a dragon covered in dark scales, with yellow eyes and a breath made not of fire but of a greenish cloud of pestilence. Every time it exhaled, entire villages vanished beneath that infectious fog. Peasants fled while Orthodox monks rang bells and shouted prayers in Greek.

Suddenly I noticed I was wearing rusted armor and carrying a lance. Looking down, I found the figure of Saint George slaying the dragon engraved on the metal.

I tried to move toward the castle, but the beast swooped down on me with tremendous violence. Its breath enveloped me, and I felt exactly the same burning I experienced in my throat every morning upon waking. I fell to the ground, convinced I was going to die, when I heard, in the distance, Anaïs's voice calling me from the tower.

"Get up!"

I tried to rise and found the lance crumbling to dust in my hands. The priests fled and the soldiers threw down their weapons before hurling themselves into a raging river. Even the villagers abandoned me as the dragon strode toward me in great leaps.

When it opened its jaws to devour me, I wondered whether I would finally see that unknown region from which only my sweet Jesus has ever returned; then I woke up.

I sat up, certain we had nothing to fear. Anaïs was sleeping soundly beside me. Outside, Chuy Avenue kept roaring like an indifferent machine.

I went to the bathroom, spat up blood mixed with phlegm, and studied myself in the mirror for several minutes. I had the face of someone who had aged five years in three weeks.

Between the end of August and the first days of September we began living through one of the most absurd stretches of our lives. The illness did not disappear entirely, but it did not kill us either. It simply kept us in a constant, intermediate state of frailty. Some days we woke relatively stable and forced ourselves to go to the university so as not to seem incompetent in front of our new employers. That produced scenes I now recall with embarrassment.

I taught my journalism class while feeling intestinal spasms and sweating profusely beneath my suit. I held forth on the influence of the media on the collective imagination, citing Horkheimer and Adorno, all while wondering whether my repeated forced sighs would keep the phlegm from sliding down from my nose. My students watched me with a mix of respect and bewilderment, probably convinced my pallor was simply some temperamental trait of Latin American intellectuals.

Anaïs, for her part, insisted on maintaining an almost heroic elegance. She put on makeup with trembling hands, graded academic papers from bed, and attended meetings where she feigned a normalcy that crumbled the moment we got back to the apartment. Several nights she went straight to bed without even taking off her shoes.

In public we were sophisticated foreign professors; in private we were two survivors of despair, trapped in a Soviet apartment.

The dust kept drifting in every morning through the windows on Chuy Avenue. I cleaned obsessively, convinced that perhaps those particles were slowly poisoning us. I scrubbed floors, disinfected surfaces,

boiled water, inspected fruit, checked bottles, and developed an almost religious paranoia about hygiene.

I even began to suspect the local markets, the sewage system, the building's pipes, and even our own colleagues, as though someone had decided to slowly wipe us out through a low-budget biological warfare campaign.

One afternoon, while trying to clean the apartment for the third time that week, I suffered such a severe bout of dizziness that I ended up sitting on the floor, staring out the window at the city. From there I watched thousands of people walking with complete normalcy along Chuy Avenue: laughing children, street vendors, students in love, old men playing chess in public parks. All of them seemed to belong to a biological reality entirely different from ours. September was beginning.

By mid-September something happened that was even more dangerous than the illness itself: we began to get used to it. The fever no longer appeared every day, but it kept returning without warning; the phlegm would ease off for hours, only to come back at night; the physical weakness had become part of our routine. Even our conversations began to revolve around symptoms with a grotesque naturalness.

"I didn't throw up today."

"I didn't get a fever either."

"The cough eased off."

"I think today's phlegm had less blood in it."

We celebrated those small physiological victories as though we were war veterans tallying survivors after a battle.

Even so, the apartment kept producing a growing distrust in me. Every morning it woke up covered in a fresh layer of grey dust. I compulsively cleaned windows, tables, floors, and kitchen utensils, but that substance reappeared with an almost supernatural discipline. I began to obsess over the idea that some invisible bacteria traveled in that

dust from Chuy Avenue and settled every night in our lungs and our food.

Anaïs watched my cleaning rituals with a mix of tenderness and exhaustion.

"If you keep this up you're going to die of exhaustion before the virus gets you."

"I'd rather die fighting."

"You're fighting particles of dirt."

"The worst wars are always invisible ones. Oh, Saint Gregory Hernández! For the love of Jesus! Help us!"

That afternoon I had one of the most intense fever episodes of the whole month. It wasn't particularly high, but it produced a strange sense of disassociation. I lay down, convinced that a few hours of sleep would fix the problem. Outside, Chuy Avenue kept roaring with its endless traffic. The car horns, the engines, and the distant shouts of street vendors seemed to slowly blend with my thoughts, forming a single mass of sound.

I accepted that the illness had defeated us and that we would have to go back to Europe empty-handed. It was then that I had the dream that would resolve those hardships.

I saw myself running alongside Anaïs through a gigantic labyrinth of dark trees and damp shrubs. The place unsettlingly recalled the hotel from *The Shining*, though far vaster and wilder. Branches tore at our faces as we ran, not knowing exactly what we were fleeing. We only knew something was coming behind us.

Then we heard the shouting.

Male voices, speaking Russian.

"Catch them!"

"Don't let them get away!"

"Kill them!"

Behind us, shapeless creatures emerged, gigantic bacterial masses covered in eyes, teeth, and deformed limbs. They did not walk: they crawled, producing a viscous, revolting sound, leaving behind on the ground a

black substance that instantly killed the vegetation.

Anaïs stumbled and fell to her knees.

I tried to lift her up, but the creatures were advancing too fast. Their shrieks grew deafening. One of them opened a gigantic mouth, and I understood that in a few seconds we would both be devoured.

Then something utterly sublime happened.

A gigantic hand descended from the sky.

I saw no face. No body. Only a luminous hand, suspended above us with absolute serenity. It held a lemon.

It split the lemon into two perfect halves.

Then it began to squeeze it.

An immense rain of lemon juice fell from the sky.

The liquid poured down onto the creatures and had an immediate effect. The bacteria began writhing, letting out unbearable shrieks. Their flesh dissolved as though being eaten away by acid. Their eyes burst. Their bodies deflated into a grey substance that vanished into the grass.

Anaïs and I stood motionless beneath that rain.

The juice fell on our bodies too.

It entered our mouths.

It washed our throats.

It purified our lungs.

I remember the taste with total clarity: it was intensely sour and, at the same time, strangely sweet.

When I woke up I was drenched in sweat.

I sat up with a start.

It was five in the morning.

Anaïs was still asleep.

I stayed sitting for several minutes, trying to rationalize what I had just experienced, but there was, in that dream, a clarity too concrete to dismiss as mere fever. It was not the fragmentary symbolism of the medieval dragon; it was a providential instruction.

I woke Anaïs.

“We need to go to the market right now.”

She opened her eyes, confused.

“What’s going on?”

“I’m going to buy lemons.”

“Now?”

“Now.”

“Marco, it’s five in the morning.”

“The Lord has just given me an extraordinarily specific order about citrus.”

Anaïs looked at me for several seconds and, instead of arguing, slowly began to get dressed.

That was when I understood that she, too, was too exhausted to tell the difference between faith, madness, and survival.

And perhaps, at that moment, the difference no longer mattered much.

We left just as the sun was rising. Bishkek had a strange beauty at that hour: the mountains looked clean against the horizon, the air was colder, and for a few minutes the city seemed less brutal than during the day. Vendors were slowly beginning to set up their stalls, and the Soviet buses had not yet choked Chuy Avenue with their black smoke.

Anaïs walked beside me in silence, too tired to argue. Every so often she would look at me as though still trying to decide whether she was witnessing a genuine mystical episode or a nervous breakdown brought on by several weeks of illness.

“Did you dream of the doctor, of Doctor Gregorio Hernández?” she murmured, referring to the noble Venezuelan physician who treated the poor for free, tirelessly, and whose healings gradually came to be regarded as miraculous.

One Christmas night in 2001, in our lovely Manchester apartment, I had told Anaïs how that saint’s charity—not yet recognized by the Church at the time—extended beyond his own death, and how, in dreams, he healed those who invoked him in the name of Jesus.

"You're right," I said, remembering my recent invocation of him, of Jesus, and of Mary. "He prescribed us lemon."

"Amen," Anaïs said, a flicker of hope in her eyes.

The market was already partly open when we arrived. I bought three kilos of lemons with a determination that made the Kyrgyz vendor laugh. He tried to talk me into buying other vegetables, but I insisted, with an almost liturgical gravity, that we had no strength to cook.

We went back to the apartment carrying the bags as though transporting experimental medicine.

We squeezed the first lemons almost ceremonially. The smell immediately filled the kitchen and produced a sense of cleanliness we hadn't felt in weeks. The acid scent filled the air, pushing aside, for a few minutes, the permanent smell of medicine, sweat, and confinement that had settled into the apartment.

I handed Anaïs a glass.

"If we die from an excess of vitamin C, I'll be demanding an explanation in the afterlife," she said before drinking.

We drank several glasses throughout the day. The taste was brutally sour and made us pull ridiculous faces, but neither of us wanted to admit it. We had pinned our hopes on that revelation.

For the first twenty-four hours, absolutely nothing happened.

The fever continued.

The cough was still there.

The phlegm didn't disappear.

The diarrhea came back briefly that night.

Anaïs looked at me with a mix of irony and compassion.

"Your citrus prophecy is taking its time."

"Like everything in life."

"Still, we didn't sleep too badly today."

The next day the phlegm began to ease; the constant swollen feeling in the throat slowly began to give way. My breathing stopped producing that strange whistle that had accompanied me through the nights. Anaïs was the first to openly admit it.

"I slept six hours straight."

"So did I."

"No fever."

"And no diarrhea."

We prayed the rosary, which we had set aside since our days in Altrincham, thanking God for his care of us.

We kept drinking lemonade with religious discipline. We bought new batches every two days and turned our kitchen into a small clandestine juice factory. The market vendors began to recognize me.

"Lemons again?"

"Again."

"And vegetables?"

"Today I really will get groceries."

Over that week the recovery moved forward slowly, but with a consistency no other medicine had achieved. Antigrippin had barely managed to numb us; the lemons seemed to be flushing out something far deeper. I returned to my culinary specialty, and we went back to eating three meals a day. We had each lost ten kilos over those three weeks.

"I told you God would take care of us."

Anaïs held to a far more elegant position.

"It doesn't matter to anyone whether it was God, your subconscious, or a particularly creative bacteria," she said one night, squeezing another lemon. "But I'm sure whoever hears this story will never make fun of their dreams again."

"Why is it so hard for most people to ask God for help?"

She laughed for the first time with genuine ease in

weeks, a real sign that we were slowly returning to the world of the living.

Our physical recovery was faster than our psychological one. By the end of September we could walk long distances, sleep full nights, and eat solid food again without feeling our digestive system was plotting an immediate rebellion. We had survived, but something in our perception of the world had shifted, irreversibly.

For weeks we kept buying lemons with an almost superstitious discipline. We no longer needed them with the same urgency, but we both feared that abandoning the ritual might invite the illness back. Our kitchen remained flooded with the citrus scent, and the market vendors began greeting us with an amused familiarity.

"The lemon French people," an old woman shouted one morning.

"He's Colombian," Anaïs would answer.

"Around here we cure all that with garlic," the woman replied, laughing. "But lemon is also a very good remedy."

Even so, the real change happened in our relationship with the university. Until then I had still held on to certain illusions about the intellectual nobility of that international project. I believed that, despite its ideological contradictions, there still existed some core of solidarity among people devoted to knowledge. The illness destroyed that naïveté once and for all.

I began to watch our colleagues with new eyes during academic meetings and diplomatic receptions. I listened to them talk about global cooperation, human rights, social justice, and the development of peripheral nations, while recalling with perfect clarity how not one of them had been capable of coming with us to a hospital, or even coming up to our apartment to check whether we were still alive. The grander their speeches about saving Central Asia, the smaller their concrete actions seemed to

me.

Rachel, for instance, asked me one morning whether we were feeling better yet.

"Much better," I answered.

"Excellent," she replied, without breaking her stride. "We need you to finish some reports before Friday."

She did not even bother to feign further interest. That brutal efficiency produced in me an inward laugh, almost admiring. Rachel represented, in its purest form, a new human species: individuals capable of managing global humanitarian causes while keeping any contact with actual, individual suffering to an absolute minimum.

Dorothy was different, but not necessarily better. During a university reception she came over with a glass of white wine and asked whether we had gotten over our "tropical intestinal adventure," as she called it, with British humor.

I told her about my dream and our miraculous recovery with lemon juice.

She explained to me, with a condescending look, that several Western researchers developed progressive immunities when living in "biologically challenging" regions. The phrase struck me as so elegantly colonial that for several seconds I didn't know whether to laugh or applaud.

Anaïs carried on as though no one had turned their back on us, being kind to everyone, attending meetings, and carrying out her duties flawlessly, but she stopped believing, deep down, in any of them. One night she explained it to me with brutal clarity.

"Your problem," she told me, "is that you still expect moral consistency from people."

"And you don't?"

"Not after this month."

"That sounds sad."

"No. It sounds practical."

The illness had not only purified our lungs and our

intestines; it had also destroyed certain European and academic illusions we were still carrying with us from France, England, and Portugal.

We also made love again for the first time in several weeks, though even that return was marked by fragility. We found ourselves much slower, more attentive, almost grateful simply for the ability to breathe normally as our bodies got to know each other again. Afterward we lay in silence, watching Bishkek's night light come in through the window.

"I thought we were going to die," Anaïs said.

"As of this adventure," I nodded, channeling one of Beckett's characters.

"And I thought that if we survived, I'd become a better person."

"And did it happen?"

She thought about it for several seconds.

"No. But I did become a less naïve person."

Only decades later, listening to survivors of the 2021 pandemic, would I hear similar remarks.

We had not come out of it turned into saints or spiritual heroes. We remained contradictory human beings, only now far less impressionable when faced with speeches about academic solidarity.

The city, too, began to transform before our eyes. Autumn crept slowly over Bishkek. The nights grew colder, the trees began to change color, and the mountains took on an almost supernatural sharpness. For the first time since our arrival we could take in some beauty without simultaneously feeling physical dread.

We did not know then that the real illness of that place was only just beginning to reveal itself, and that the bodies we would soon watch deteriorate would not be our own, but those of the institutions and the people around us.

During the last days of September I developed a

habit I would have mocked in earlier stages of my life: I began carefully recording my dreams. I bought a cheap notebook at the bazaar and kept it by the bed. Every early morning I would jot down fragmentary images, loose phrases, absurd symbols, any detail that might otherwise vanish with the daylight. Not every dream carried the brutal clarity of the lemon episode; many were simply chaotic residue of fever, anxiety, and exhaustion. Even so, after that experience, I found it impossible to treat them with the old psychoanalytic condescension.

Anaïs watched this new discipline with French good humor.

"In two weeks you'll be interpreting the flight patterns of pigeons."

"Depends what they reveal to me."

"That's exactly what a future medieval heretic would say."

"To whose dreams you owe your life."

"Touché!"

Despite her teasing, she too had begun to change. We returned to our rosaries in front of the small Fátima statue that had sparked the argument with Mirbek weeks earlier. In this way we reaffirmed our relationship with the invisible, so incomprehensible to our university colleagues.

One night she asked me something that left me speechless.

"Why did God let us suffer so much before stepping in?"

It took me several minutes to answer.

"It's like asking why we all die."

"That's not like you; you usually answer with clever thoughts."

"Suffering, like death, is a means of manipulation. I think God wanted you and me to overcome it; now, what's left of all those fevers and delusions?"

"The certainty that God was with us."

We stayed silent, staring at the ceiling. Anaïs slowly

turned toward me.

“Other people’s indifference was terribly cruel.”

“That’s how people are with those they have to watch suffer.”

“They were raised with a Soviet rector as their only God.”

I couldn’t help laughing.

That comparison, however absurd it seemed, held a certain uncomfortable truth. We had come to Central Asia believing we would face only cultural clashes, academic tensions, and ideological struggles. Neither of us had seriously considered the possibility of such a physical, primal vulnerability. The body had reminded us, brutally, that all intellectual ambition rests on ridiculously fragile organs.

Mirbek’s warning about Dean Svetlana now took on an unexpected, almost prophetic tone. For weeks I had believed he was speaking only of workplace conflicts; now I began to suspect his warning belonged to a much larger logic. Bishkek seemed to function as a system of successive trials, where every moment of relief was merely the antechamber to a more complex conflict.

My hygienic paranoia, fortunately, began to fade. I stopped compulsively cleaning every surface of the apartment and began accepting that I could not control every invisible agent in the world. That realization produced a strange kind of freedom. Once one accepts that one cannot fully master matter, one inevitably begins to ask questions about whatever it is that might actually govern the chaos.

The recovery was so gradual that we barely noticed the exact moment we stopped feeling sick; one morning I simply woke up and realized I had slept deeply, breathed normally, and eaten breakfast without fear.

That sense of restored normalcy produced in me a strange euphoria. I walked for hours through Bishkek as

though I had just been released from a long imprisonment. For the first time since our arrival I saw the city without the distorting lens of illness. The trees were beginning to turn yellow, the mountains stood out with an almost offensive sharpness, and the cold autumn air felt cleaner than anything we had breathed in August.

Every Sunday, Anaïs and I took Vladimir’s taxi to do the shopping at the bazaar where we had bought our providential lemons. The vendors greeted us joyfully.

“The lemon foreigners!” the vegetable seller would greet us.

Anaïs laughed with that lightness I loved so much.

We bought dried fruit, bread, and spices, and for a few minutes mingled with the crowd. We even ventured to have lunch at various food stalls, without ever again suffering such catastrophic consequences.

It was during one of our evening walks that I decided to tell her something I had kept to myself.

“I’ve been going back through my old journals.”

“And?”

“It’s not the first time I’ve dreamed things that later happened.”

Anaïs watched me closely.

“What kind of things?”

I told her then about small episodes I had dismissed for years as coincidences: strange intuitions before trips, fragmentary dreams about people who later reappeared, vague warnings that only made sense in hindsight. Nothing as clear as the lemon episode, but enough to unsettle me intellectually.

Anaïs listened without interrupting.

“You know I have those revelations too, if not in dreams, then in memory.”

“Normal people prefer to believe they’re mere statistical coincidences.”

“And who are normal people?”

I studied the mountains surrounding Bishkek for

several seconds.

"The great majority, I suppose."

She stayed silent and then answered with a lucidity that always ended up disarming me.

"Be careful."

"Of what?"

"Of contradicting that majority."

I couldn't help laughing.

"Someone has to. Why should we hide the wonderful things we've lived through?"

Anaïs took my arm.

"Maybe because you don't deserve to die so young."

"But my whole story is precisely about how God kept you and me from dying so young—probably poisoned."

"You're right," Anaïs mused. "It has to be written down."

That answer stayed with me for days. I kept writing down dreams, reading theology, revisiting mystical texts, and, at the same time, carrying out my academic work as though both lives could coexist without conflict. In the mornings I analyzed political speeches and comparative literature; at night I reread passages of theology and metaphysics.

Nine years later I would understand why that silence, too, was part of the learning; on the first of June, two thousand eleven, when the Lord Jesus manifested himself in my room and anointed me as a prophet.

In that epiphany, which I sing of in my book of poems *Hymns to Jesus*, God ordered me to write the complete story of my life, with its falls, persecutions, humiliations, and miraculous triumphs, so that people would know we exist...

This novel, like all those I have written, partly answers to that mandate.

6. A Free Thinker Among Factions

The summer fruit on these highlands is sweeter than I expected. I discovered this early this morning, before Anaïs woke up, when I went alone to the market downtown with the excuse of buying bread and ended up wandering for almost an hour among the stalls. A Kyrgyz woman of impossible-to-determine age—the mountain sun makes no distinction between forty and seventy—held out, without a word, a slice of watermelon on her open palm. I took it, tasted it, and stopped in my tracks.

It wasn't the calculated perfection of European fruit, the kind that arrives at supermarkets in Brussels or Paris wrapped in cellophane, perfectly symmetrical, as though designed by an engineer rather than grown by a farmer. Nor was it the slightly deceptive lushness of certain Colombian fruits, which promise more with their color and smell than they later deliver in the mouth. This watermelon was something else: sweet with a kind of modesty, as though it knew exactly how far it should go and had no wish to overdo it. I stood there a moment, juice running down my fingers, the sun striking the market's awnings, and thought that there are pleasures one does not deserve but is granted anyway, and that perhaps that is a good part of what we call happiness.

I bought half a kilo of grapes, a couple of peaches, and went back to the apartment before Anaïs opened her eyes.

And though some tensions have arisen, I can't complain.

The reception was last week. We were invited by the American University of Kyrgyzstan, an institution largely funded by American money and sustained by that

particular faith held by certain Washington circles that liberal education, exported with enough budget behind it, can change the course of a nation.

Anaïs wore the blue dress I bought her in Almaty. She looked good in it. I told her so.

"Are you telling me that because it's true, or because you want us to get there on time?" she answered, without turning to look at me, fixing an earring in front of the mirror.

"For both reasons," I admitted. "Though mostly the first."

We arrived late anyway. The room was full of that mix these corners of the world inevitably produce: second-tier diplomats speaking with the authority of first-tier ones, academics with an adventurer's spirit who deep down miss their library, some businessman with a nose for markets nobody else wants yet, and several Kyrgyz officials smiling with the infinite patience of those who know foreigners always leave, sooner or later.

It was in that setting that we ran into Daniel Weiler again; his grey hair was combed back, and he wore one of those smiles the English call disarming—the kind that disarms you before you've even decided whether you want to unsettle him. He wore a dark suit that cost money without announcing it, and, beside him, holding a glass, with an expression somewhere between bored and decorative, was a girl who couldn't have been more than nineteen. Weiler introduced her simply as "my assistant," with the ease of someone who has rehearsed the line enough times that it no longer weighs on him.

"Kyrgyzstan is Asia's best-kept secret," he told Anaïs, taking her hand with a barely suggested bow, more European than American. "You and your husband are now in one of the most beautiful places in the world."

Anaïs smiled. That smile of hers I know well: genuine on the surface, calculating underneath, not out of malice but out of instinct. It's the smile of a woman

assessing while appearing merely to be pleasant.

"Have you been here long?" she asked him.

"Two years," Weiler answered. "Though sometimes it feels like two centuries. This country changes you."

Later, already in the taxi on our way back to the apartment, Anaïs told me:

"You should visit him; he was recommended by the U.S. State Department, and he rides around in a limousine."

"He avoids me," I answered, looking out the window at the dark trees along Chuy Avenue. "When we were introduced we barely exchanged six words. And, honestly, I don't like his fondness for teenagers."

"Teenagers? She was his assistant."

"She was his nineteen-year-old assistant in a dress that wasn't exactly office wear."

"That doesn't prove anything."

"Maybe not," I conceded, "but it suggests plenty."

There was a silence.

"He's an important man," she said finally. "He has connections. It isn't only youth that attracts women."

I looked at her.

"Is that a general observation, or are you telling me something specific?"

"It's a general observation."

"I'll think about it," I answered, somewhat irritated.

Anaïs won't believe me if I tell her I keep my distance from Weiler out of prudence. She'll think it's jealousy—and she'll be partly right—but that's not all of it. From Shakespeare I learned all too early about humanity's weakness for flattery:

Frailty, thy name is woman!

And men like that, on top of the flattery, hold the power, the nationality, and the money that seduce most people. I harbor no illusions about my wife's character; if a suitor appeared able to offer her a materially better life than the one I can give her, she would not hesitate to consider the possibility of leaving, all the more so given how her mother eggs her on, constantly reminding her how much her own life improved after divorcing and marrying a wealthy man like Groumont.

Besides, Rachel's reaction at the reception—that visible tension the moment Weiler appeared—was a symptom of a battle of intrigues between SEP and the American University of Kyrgyzstan that I had no intention of getting drawn into.

The following week I ran into him again in one of the university hallways.

"Dr. Weiler," I greeted him.

"Ah, our Colombian," he answered, shaking my hand.

I decided to make the most of the moment.

"I've always wanted to ask you something. How does a man who had already achieved the American dream end up as a college president in these remote highlands?"

He smiled, pleased to be reciting a line he had already polished through repeated interviews.

"I've always been interested in languages and new cultures. I didn't want to die a predictable person."

"And how is your Russian coming along?"

"I've been taking classes since I arrived. It's been a fascinating challenge."

I spoke to him then in Russian—not a complex sentence, just a simple question about the winds in Bishkek and Lake Issyk-Kul.

"Как вам ветреная погода в Бишкеке и на озере Иссык-Куль?"

Weiler fell silent; I watched the red slowly climb up his neck.

He answered in English, about how pleasant life was by Lake Issyk-Kul.

He hadn't understood a word.

I understood he belonged to that class of Americans who arrive genuinely convinced they love other cultures, but whom privilege turns intellectually lazy: everyone wants to practice their English on them, everyone flatters them, and in the end they never have to make the real effort of penetrating another civilization.

I felt guilty for having exposed him.

"My wife has also had trouble with Russian," I said quickly. "She's only just started at the basic level."

"And you?"

"B1."

"Impressive," he answered. "It's refreshing to meet American academics like that."

I appreciated being included in the continent.

"I'm grateful you consider me American. Many of your colleagues insist on associating me with the Amazon jungle."

He let out a laugh.

"I'm a great admirer of Fidel Castro. ¡No pasarán!"

I smiled without answering. It has always struck me as extraordinary how certain Western academics romanticize other people's revolutions from the comfort of their own privileges. Admiring the man responsible for the civil wars that have kept Latin America mired in poverty and backwardness, all from a dollar salary and an armored vehicle, was too perfect an irony to bother debating.

I asked him what other parts of the world he had visited, and he immediately told me how much he loved France.

He mentioned Montmartre, the Trocadéro, hour-long trips across the English Channel for concerts at the Albert Hall, others for opera seasons at Teatro alla Scala.

He even fumbled out a few clumsy phrases in French. I didn't know whether this was genuine passion for the arts or a particularly sophisticated form of millionaire's vanity. Probably both.

Nor did I know what to make of the rumors about his female companions. Some claimed he was simply a generous philanthropist who helped students without resources and drove them home in his armored car. Others insisted those favors came with less innocent strings attached.

Between the two versions lay too wide a grey area for any peace of mind.

Perhaps benefactor, perhaps predator, as often happens in certain circles of power, Weiler had learned to inhabit that ambiguity comfortably.

The fact was that he had achieved the American dream and now represented a culturally refined version of empire: he talked about other people's revolutions from his own privileges, pretended to master languages he never actually needed to learn, and traveled the world administering scholarships on a budget far cheaper than a war.

And yet, when I mentioned my interest in film, something changed in his expression.

"Filmmaker?"

"I've made several films."

"I have some contacts in European independent film," he said. "We should have dinner one of these nights..."

And he took his leave without ever pinning down the invitation.

When I got back to the apartment that night, Anaïs was reading on the sofa, a cup of tea in her hands.

"How was your day?" she asked, without looking up.

"I talked with Weiler."

Now she did look up.

“And?”

“He’s a dandy with power,” I admitted. “And emptier than he lets on. Both things at once. He wanted to invite us to dinner, but in the end thought better of it...”

Anaïs smiled faintly.

“At least you tried...”

I didn’t answer. I poured myself a glass of water and looked out the window at the dark mountains at the edge of Bishkek, that silent horizon that always seemed to remind us that human ambitions, armored limousines, marital jealousy, and retirement plans in Paris were, seen from the right distance, just hard little seeds at the center of an overly sweet fruit.

That weekend we traveled to the induction course, at the fantastical Aurora resort, once the Soviet Politburo’s vacation retreat, set on the shore of the mysterious Lake Issyk-Kul.

We were woken at five in the morning. Outside, a bluish darkness still reigned, and the early cold cut through the light coats we had brought from Bishkek. While we waited for the bus in front of the administrative building we met Petra.

She was a Swiss woman of French descent, blonde, distinguished, though not attractive, extraordinarily thin, with sinewy arms that looked carved out of Nordic granite. Her jaw was stern, her smile rare and somewhat masculine, and she had that haughty gaze that made me think—perhaps unfairly—of the propaganda posters of a certain Europe that once believed it had scientifically discovered racial superiority. There was something Viking, martial, and perfectly efficient about her that produced in me a mix of fascination and alarm.

She talked constantly about her Indian boyfriend, who would soon be coming to visit her.

“He’s coming in October,” she told Anaïs and me almost immediately after introducing herself.

She repeated it two or three more times over the next few minutes, as though wanting to make clear that, despite her obvious physical appeal, she already belonged, emotionally, to someone else. Anaïs took to her at once.

Petra, however, wasted no time abandoning romantic topics for considerably more dangerous ones.

“You two arrived in the middle of a war,” she said, with an almost cheerful smile.

“What kind of war?” I asked.

“Money, sex, scholarships, power... the normal war of American universities exported to the third world.”

That immediately caught my attention.

Petra explained that the previous semester a scandal had broken out that nearly forced the closure of SEP’s program and even implicated the Open Society Foundation. According to the university’s more conservative circles, the foundation had imported “the bourgeois decadence of the West”: homosexuality, moral corruption, and excessive freedom of thought.

Petra let out a laugh.

“Which is absurd. If there was corruption here, it already existed under the Soviet Union. And homosexuality happens in every nation and every social circle; here it was simply hidden away like an ailment.”

“And how do you know all this?” Anaïs asked.

“Rachel talks when she’s furious,” Petra answered. “And Rachel has been furious for months.”

There she began explaining the real conflict to us.

President Weiler maintained that any major scholarship award had to go through the university’s formal administration. Rachel maintained that SEP, thanks to its connections with USAID and various American congressmen, was the one actually bringing in the money and should therefore also control how the scholarships were distributed.

“In theory there’s a committee,” Petra explained. “But the real problem is always who appoints the

committee.”

“Who ultimately controls the amounts handed out,” Anaïs cut in.

“Who the scholarship recipients end up owing favors to,” Petra nodded.

She explained that Weiler had temporarily won the bureaucratic battle, but Rachel did not seem willing to accept defeat.

“Until she sees him fall, she won’t rest.”

“And that’s why she’s still here...” I concluded.

“Officially she travels for work. Unofficially she’s waiting for the right moment to destroy him.”

I looked at Anaïs, and we both silently understood we had arrived at an institution considerably more unstable than we had been led to believe.

Minutes later we boarded the bus.

We were seated in the second-to-last row, right in front of Jeff, who occupied the back seats surrounded by nearly five hundred plastic bottles of water drawn from the springs that feed Lake Issyk-Kul.

Jeff began explaining the terms of an open competition for giving lectures in Ulaanbaatar at the end of September. I took notes and immediately conceived an essay on international communication that would help readers of any country identify the false impartiality of certain media outlets.

“My mouth feels very dry,” I said as I opened my second bottle of water.

“Take as many as you like,” Jeff answered. “Was the competition clear?”

“You didn’t cover the selection criteria,” I answered.

Jeff sighed, irritated.

“That’s exactly why people say I’m not clear. Didn’t I say SEP would select the best proposals?”

“I mean the criteria, not the judges.”

His smile was brief and venomous.

“Well, the minimum is that candidates hold a doctorate.”

I understood the message immediately.

My MFA was a terminal degree equivalent to a doctorate within the arts field, but it was not a traditional PhD. In the United States that distinction lets many academics practice a particularly elegant form of intellectual classism: an artist can produce extraordinary work, but if he hasn’t written a sufficiently voluminous thesis, he remains under a certain suspicion from the university aristocracy.

The most hypocritical part was that the rule was rarely applied consistently. Many professors there held only master’s degrees, specializations, or even simple bachelor’s degrees. It all depended on political and personal affinities.

Jeff must have noticed my expression.

“Although, of course... if the proposal is brilliant we could even send a student.”

I thanked him for the academic scrap.

Over the following days I came to suspect that Jeff didn’t hold toward me a simple professional reserve. There was something else, more uncomfortable, more primitive. Every time Anaïs spoke with other men, he watched her body, her slender figure, the way her dress fell over her hips, with an excessively analytical attention. They were brief, furtive glances, immediately disguised.

Jeff was married to Rachel, who was nearly twenty years his senior; if that was true love, admirable. But his eyes sometimes suggested a less noble form of comparative frustration.

We climbed through semi-desert hills, growing steeper with each turn. Mirbek came up to me and asked whether I had ever seen a landscape like it in my life. I smiled condescendingly and explained I was from the Andes, where the mountains were denser and steeper.

"These hills remind me of the Chicamocha Canyon," I remarked, "the second largest in the world after the Grand Canyon. The slopes I'm looking at now aren't as steep, but the abundance of rocks, cacti, and goats make the two landscapes similar."

Since adolescence I've carried a peculiar physiological discipline that for years I mistook for hypochondria: waking two or three times every night to drink water and urinate, with the punctuality of a medieval monk summoned by bells. Doctors never found diabetes, kidney failure, or any metabolic disorder; my test results were offensively normal. Only much later did I understand that my poorly repaired septum and mild rhinitis led me to sleep with my mouth open, like a beached fish, and to wake with the thirst of a nomad in the Sahara. The body, a creature of habit, eventually turned that nightly interruption into an automatic ritual. We had left Bishkek at dawn, around six in the morning, when in London it was barely one in the morning; while my colleagues admired the Asian mountains with diplomatic fervor, my body believed itself to be in the middle of a peaceful London sleep and demanded water with sectarian ferocity. My first culture shock would not be the turbulent steppes of Central Asia, but my own bladder.

I felt an urgent need to urinate; I noticed the bus had no bathroom and that I had already downed twelve half-liter bottles of water. I made my way to the front seats, where I greeted Darixa, who stood guard, cerberus-like, beside the driver. I explained my urgency, and, with that haughtiness so typical of her, she ordered the bus stopped. I got off and relieved myself behind some bushes; several other passengers took advantage of the improvised stop. We got back on and set off again.

Back in my seat I felt a desperate need to drink another liter of water. The scene repeated itself, much to my dismay. This time only I got off, amid the jokes of

several passengers. I got back on, drank more water, and had the bus stopped several more times over the course of the trip. Darixa grew increasingly irritated, and, at my last request, refused outright to stop the bus, at which point I had to confess that, unless she let me off, I would have to urinate into the empty water bottles right beside Jeff.

By the end of the trip, several passengers came up to prescribe me remedies for kidney trouble, everything from broths with garlic and green onion to urophagia—the practice of drinking one's own urine on an empty stomach. Rachel even joked—with that bureaucratic grandiosity she took such pride in—that I would surely be the first to request the SEP medical insurance, which would get me specialized treatment at a hospital in Frankfurt, a grim prediction that very nearly came true during our days confined to bed.

We got off the bus and saw the imposing concrete mass of the Aurora sanatorium, the former Soviet Politburo vacation retreat, raised on the shore of the mysterious Lake Issyk-Kul as though someone had wanted to set a concrete ship sailing among the mountains.

The building, designed in the shape of a ship, seemed to answer, in secret, to that image from Chinghiz Aitmatov's *The White Ship*: the boy who dreams of waving from the shore at an impossible vessel, as though all the hope in the world could be concentrated in it. It wasn't hard to understand why a Soviet architect, raised on the epic of the future, would have wanted to turn a sanatorium into a motionless ship: the revolution too had promised to set sail toward a kingdom of justice, but there it now stood, run aground on the lake's northern shore, turned into a conference hotel for officials, academics, and international bureaucrats.

More than a hundred rooms mimicked the structure of a ship, with a giant anchor mounted between two columns that unintentionally recalled the base of a modern church bell tower. That mass of concrete was

supposedly built for the rest of the people—that is, of the peasants and workers; history, however, had shown that those who did the work of peasants and laborers were nearly always the last to enjoy the resorts built in their name. A pyramidal bureaucracy of social leaders, technocrats, party secretaries, security officials, and well-connected relatives made sure that power and money never slipped from their hands, while everyone kept repeating, with the gravity of a secular mass, that they acted on the people's behalf.

The interior retained a somewhat weary dignity. There were no longer any visible portraits of Lenin, Brezhnev, or the local secretaries; they had surely been removed after the fall of the Soviet Union. In their place remained sculptures, mosaics, ceiling lamps, wide corridors, and an overly rigorous cleanliness that could not entirely hide the wear beneath it. It smelled of antiseptic, old carpet, varnished wood, and that air of an elegant hospital with which late socialism seemed to have tried to justify leisure: resting was not surrendering to bourgeois pleasure, but receiving treatment necessary for the worker's health. From some nearby hall drifted saccharine piano music, as though Richard Clayderman were playing Tchaikovsky or Mussorgsky so as not to disturb the convalescents of an exhausted revolution.

"You can be sure they're recording everything we do and say here," I told Anaïs jokingly, as we walked down a path lined with flower arches, alluding to the daring recordings in *From Russia with Love*.

"Then behave," she answered. "At least until we find the room."

Being a couple, we were given a double suite, which let us host three European colleagues for Saturday evening: Petra, Venkatesh, and Gretchen.

Petra knew how to break her intimidating image as a tough woman by introducing herself as Chinese. The joke

worked like a splash of ice water: seeing that sharp-featured Viking declare herself Chinese, with such absurd ease, instantly relaxed the mood. It was not, of course, a mere passing joke. Petra knew her stern face could be unsettling, reminiscent of the infamous overseers of the concentration camps, and so she got ahead of the suspicion by adopting an impossible identity. There was something clever in that strategy, and something deeply theatrical.

The moment she stepped off the bus she looked for Venkatesh, from whom she never strayed far. He was of Indian descent, raised in the neighborhoods of Birmingham and trained in political science, so that his sympathy for Marx seemed less a choice than an obligation of his own trajectory. He was vegan, didn't even drink milk, and spoke with that teacherly authority of the British who have read enough to turn any conversation into a seminar. He had a delicate voice, almost that of a nice boy from India, but his judgments were sharp and carried a confidence that left no room for the person he was speaking to.

"Like all British sociologists," Anaïs told me quietly, "he cites Marx before asking for the salt."

Even so, the moment I mentioned the word "discourse," so dear to Foucault's philosophy, Venkatesh told me he was only interested, these days, in post-Foucauldian philosophy.

"And so," I asked, sharply, "why cite a nineteenth-century economist like Marx? His theses have already been refuted or superseded by, say, Schumpeter, in *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*."

"Marx is different," he defended himself, without blushing. "For one thing, he's studied in every philosophy and sociology department in the world."

"They said the same about Saint Thomas in the fifteenth century," I replied, just as Petra cut in to praise the sanatorium's Soviet architecture.

Venkatesh smiled like the most likable kid in his

class. His defense mechanism was effective: I couldn't tell whether he was celebrating my remark, mocking me, or simply buying time to decide which of his readings to throw at me next.

Gretchen, on the other hand, almost never smiled. She was a doctor of anthropology, recently graduated in Germany, delicate, short in stature—which she made up for with high heels—blonde, with a mass of curly hair, and a face as attentive as those of the Führer's secretaries must have been, diligently noting down and carrying out the agenda of a catastrophe. Her veganism echoed Venkatesh's, though in her it seemed less an ethics of compassion than a bodily discipline. She wore intellectual glasses, her hair was unkempt, and she had that German neutrality that, far from hiding desire, makes it more legible by contrast.

"Is it true you also speak German?" she asked me. "What made you study it?"

"Schopenhauer," I answered, taking a glass of wine from the table.

"I don't understand," she said, irritated. "How can you study it for an author available in English? I studied Arabic precisely because there aren't enough people who can translate or understand it."

"I'm European," I apologized, "but by adoption. Don't forget a Colombian's aspirations might differ from your own. In fact, I study Latin and Ancient Greek to understand the roots of European culture. Basics of anthropology?"

"You study dead languages?" she scoffed, puzzled. "Keep that up and you'll end up with no friends..."

"Not doing so closes the door to an entire universe of knowledge."

"And your wife," she asked, with a competitive edge, "is she part of that passionate cultural interest?"

"We desire what we love most," I said, decoding

her thought: would he love a German lady as much as he loves his Frenchwoman?

Gretchen smiled, flushing at that brief exchange between us. There was in her a wish to flee Germany through other languages, other bodies, other geographies. Arabic drew her not only as a living language, but as the promise of an alternative identity.

Years later she would end up marrying an Arab man and living in Lebanon, but even then it was clear her interest in the East was not merely academic: she was seeking, in another culture, an escape from the symbolic prison of her own origins.

"I've been reading Popper," Petra said, resting her arm on Venkatesh's shoulder, "who criticizes totalitarian systems like communism. Venkatesh, on the other hand, defends the Soviet Union. What do you two think?"

"The fact is it's no longer functional," Gretchen remarked. "And if it's not functional, there's no reason to defend it."

"That's not it!" Venkatesh said, a hand to his chest. "I was talking about some advantages the Soviet system had over the capitalist one."

"It's a matter of schooling," I cut in. "Petra studied in Boston, alongside those who defeated the Soviet Union; Venkatesh, on the other hand, is from England, a nation that grew close to them against Hitler."

Venkatesh smiled again with that somewhat comic sweetness, but his eyes hardened. I understood that, for him, Marx was not simply an author: he was the root of an intellectual genealogy that let him confront the capitalist world without feeling reduced to a product of Birmingham or an exotic figure in the British academy. Marx gave him history, authority, and belonging. He let him speak not as a grateful immigrant, but as the heir of a tradition that, in his view, had understood the secret machinery of power.

I, on the other hand, moved in a different register. I was interested in Foucault not as a French fad, but for his

archaeology of institutions, for his way of tracing the invisible roots of thought and obedience. But even Foucault struck me as insufficient unless one acknowledged that many of his insights had already been laid out by Durkheim and Borges, authors the philosophical academy rarely recognizes as his forerunners. Philosophers like Foucault in the sixties, and Byung-Chul Han in the two-thousands, simply repackaged those gems from the past with the composure of someone who knows their own signature will get the credit for the novelty.

For me, however, the most important philosopher in history remained Jesus of Nazareth. His teachings on the essential equality of all men, the protection of the defenseless, and the moral danger of power had not been surpassed by Marx, nor by Nietzsche, nor by any sociologist with a university office. Marx carried the fatal disadvantage of having justified violence as a path to historical redemption; Jesus, by contrast, had placed salvation beyond death and had turned this world into a second gestation, the ethical gestation of the soul. In that sense, Marxism often struck me as the siren song of the violent: it promised justice, but left behind corpses managed by committees.

I limited myself to pondering those musings while drinking wine and watching Petra, Venkatesh, and Gretchen settle into that sanatorium with the ease of people who believe they are analyzing history, while history, quietly, was using them as material for study.

Before saying goodnight, Gretchen held a long look with Anaïs, a gesture of ambivalent affection, a mix of appraisal, desire, and rivalry that Anaïs picked up on at once.

"She doesn't wash her hair," she told me before we went to bed.

"Maybe it's an act of rebellion against bourgeois hygiene."

"I noticed she was looking at you too much."

"A maiden as charming as she is barbarous," I said, and Anaïs laughed, pleased that I was speaking badly of her. In truth I was flattering her, comparing her to the untamed German matrons who had once defeated so many Roman invaders.

We went out onto the hotel terrace; the afternoon hung suspended in a slanted brightness pouring through the tall windows, dissolving into the steam of the medicinal pool. The air, laden with salts, wrapped around our bodies with an almost therapeutic density, and the architecture—long, rigid, like a grounded hull—held the voices in a uniform murmur.

We had lunch with a slowness that seemed dictated by the landscape. The menu, arranged with elegant restraint, reinterpreted Kyrgyz tradition with an almost ceremonial precision: a starter of warm roasted beetroot salad with sour cream and fresh dill, followed by small open manty, delicately filled with spiced lamb, their thin dough holding the aromatic steam in every fold. Then came a deconstructed beshbarmak, its tender, barely shredded slices of meat resting on a silky pasta, bathed in a clear broth that kept its depth without heaviness. To one side, freshly baked bread, its crust firm and its crumb elastic, still warm.

The wine, unexpected in that setting, came from near Tashkent: a dry white, with a precise acidity and mineral notes that seemed to extend the very air of the lake. Anaïs held it up against the light before tasting it, watching the light pass through it with an almost watery transparency.

"It has something of stone in it," she said. "As though you were drinking the landscape."

"Or its memory," I answered.

We drank without hurrying. The service was discreet, almost invisible, and the terrace hung suspended between the lake's glimmer and the building's severe

geometry. The conversation drifted effortlessly toward the immediate: the trip, the still-unfamiliar names, the roads still to come toward Osh, the professors sharing this uncertain crossing with us.

We took a short nap afterward. The fatigue of travel and the meal settled over us naturally, and the dim room received the silence with absolute docility. When I woke up, Anaïs was gone. On the table, a short note, in her slanted handwriting:

I'm at the pool.

I put on my swimsuit and a silk robe and went down to the resort, where the afternoon carried on, unchanged, still suspended in that same mineral steam. #

7. The Nomads' Bazaar

When I arrived, Anaïs and Flor—a Spanish woman with a long face and a square body—were moving gently through the warm water. The steam blurred the outlines and closed the distances, so that every gesture, every word, took on an unintended closeness.

I left my things at reception, and on my way back I spotted Anaïs by the edge, a tall glass in her hand, smiling with that light elegance that always seemed to promise instant complicity. Facing her were Omar and Rick, two Turkish men of twenty-six and twenty-seven, teachers in Tashkent, headed, like us, toward Osh.

Both had that expansive charm of men who haven't yet learned to hold themselves back. Their bodies, however, betrayed a less rigorous discipline: soft bellies, visible even under the water, wide shoulders without definition, a slightly neglected freshness. They wore dark, snug swim trunks that accentuated more than they hid; the wet fabric clung to their bellies and thighs with a frankness the steam could not disguise. There was, in their movements, an effort to appear agile—somewhat theatrical strokes, frequent laughter, broad gestures—as though trying to make up with enthusiasm for what their bodies could not yet deliver.

They leaned toward Anaïs with a closeness growing less and less disguised, holding their glasses with a rehearsed ease and exchanging quick glances that seemed to divide up whose turn it was to speak. One would start a sentence with enthusiasm; the other would pick it up with an emphatic nod, and both kept up that alternating rhythm meant to hold her attention without granting a single pause. Steam beaded on their foreheads and ran down their necks; the water, swaying against their bodies, revealed without mercy the roundness of their bellies beneath the

dark fabric of their swimsuits.

Anaïs answered with an exact courtesy: a slight tilt of the head, a measured smile, her gaze dropping for a moment to the surface before returning to them, keeping a margin of her own within that insistence.

I stepped forward, and the ripple my entrance caused threw off the group's balance. Rick adjusted his stance; Omar sought a moment's support with an open palm against the water, and Anaïs turned toward me with a naturalness that reorganized the scene.

"Have you been prescribed cocktails?" I asked.

"I didn't order them; they were served to me," she answered, lifting the glass slightly.

"We wanted to treat her," one of them added.

"I've already told them it wasn't necessary," Anaïs said, with a softness that did not yield. "Several times."

"It's just a gesture," the other insisted, shrugging.

Omar then studied me with a different attention. His expression settled, as though recalibrating some inner measure. He exchanged a brief signal with Rick and, with a slight nod, invited me to come with him.

We moved toward the edge, where the steam thickened and the room's murmur became one indistinct mass. On the stone, two glasses sat waiting, prepared in advance.

"For you."

The Manhattan caught the afternoon light in an iridescent amber. He drank first, rested his elbow on the edge, and let his gaze linger on the surface before speaking.

"I grew up in Istanbul, in a neighborhood where every relationship taught you your place. Next door lived a girl whose beauty seemed to reorganize everything around her. For years everyone assumed we would end up together, because they watched us repeat the same everyday gestures: walking, talking, keeping a closeness that seemed enough to build a future on."

He swirled the ice slowly, as though pacing what was to come.

"Then another man appeared. Also young, but with money... and connections. His father held state contracts, but that wasn't really what mattered. There were other relationships, less visible ones. He bought a large house in the neighborhood and turned it into something like a palace. People started visiting him at a different frequency; some walked in with respect; others, with fear."

He ran a fingertip along the rim of his glass.

"I understood then what my place was, and acted accordingly: I smoothed his approach, arranged encounters, made it all look natural. They married in the end; I was there at the wedding, as one of the special guests."

He looked up at me, without harshness, but without concession either.

"In that neighborhood I also learned something else: those who can't read those situations tend to disappear in ways that are... not elegant. A neighbor, for instance, insisted for a while on ignoring my friend's rank. He was found in his apartment. Some said it was a gas accident; others spoke of an argument that ended badly. No one investigated too closely."

The ice clinked softly against the glass.

"After that came studies, travels, the doctorate. Ever since, I read situations the same way: I identify positions, affinities, possible alliances... and I recognize when certain presences change the course of events."

He set the glass down.

"Your companion has a singular presence. She's European, like us..."

"Ah!" I cut in, smiling. "So Turkey wants to be part of Europe now, does it?"

"We owned half of Europe for centuries, and it's likely we'll own it again. Our diaspora, you know, breeds like rabbits; the locals, on the other hand..."

A brief pause, barely noticeable.

"It would be wise to avoid unnecessary misunderstandings. Especially when it comes to Latin Americans courting... European ladies."

He narrowed his eyes with an almost innocent curiosity.

"You're not European, are you?"

I held the glass, letting the cold settle into my hand.

"Ask her," I said.

We went back.

Rick shifted only slightly. Anaïs turned her face calmly, the rim of her glass grazing her lips.

"We wanted to ask you something."

"Yes?"

"Him... who is he?"

Anaïs held their gaze for barely a second before answering.

"I'm with my husband," she said, with a firmness that did not disturb her smile.

"Is that a joke?"

"No."

"We didn't see you together."

"I'm with him."

There was a visible hesitation, a crack in the confidence with which they had begun.

"He looks Turkish."

"He's Colombian."

The confusion resolved itself into hurried apologies. They pulled back with a sudden courtesy, as though the situation demanded an immediate retreat, and sank back into the pool up to their chests. Anaïs and I walked over to a table about ten meters away, where the towels lay under the whitish afternoon light.

"They were persistent," she said, relaxed now.

"They kept ordering without asking, one after another."

"A pedagogy of excess."

"And remarkable faith in their method."

From our table we watched as both of them, once they'd retreated, now turned their attention to Flor. She had been in the water with an ease entirely at odds with the earlier scene: a strong body, shaped by constant exercise, broad shoulders, sure movements. She wasn't conventionally beautiful, but there was in her presence a direct, almost defiant energy that commanded a different kind of interest.

"They're professors in Tashkent," Anaïs continued. "They're going to Osh too, unlike us, who are stuck right in the middle of all the intrigue."

"The three of them are hitting it off," I remarked, watching them splash around laughing.

"They'll have months to celebrate it."

In the pool, Flor rose up in front of them and, without any preamble, pointed at their bellies.

"That needs to come down."

Omar and Rick's laughter was brief, less confident than before.

"We can try," Rick said.

"I know some extreme therapies," she replied. "Mountains, hiking, cold water. Discipline."

Her tone left no room for argument. She listed off activities with precision, mentioning routes toward the mountains near the Chinese border, climbs, long treks, prolonged effort. As she spoke, they listened with a new attentiveness, as though in that demand they had found a different promise from the one they had been chasing a few minutes earlier.

"They'll want to try everything with her," Anaïs said quietly. "Even what their own culture denies them."

"I see a Dona Flor with two husbands," I said, alluding to the Brazilian novel.

"They're young..." Anaïs nodded.

I watched the two men nod along, now fully absorbed in Flor's instructions, as she set the pace with an

almost pedagogical authority.

"You think they'll fall for her," Anaïs added.

"They might."

The steam kept rising in soft columns, and the afternoon light spread over the wet surfaces. In that enclosed space, the scene's axis had shifted: from the gentle siege of Anaïs to the discipline Flor now imposed. They seemed to have found a new direction.

"Two hundred pool laps!" she said, slapping the water with her palm.

Before they could withdraw entirely into Flor's orbit, I tried mentioning to them the possibility of putting together a joint proposal for one of SEP's conferences. I thought a shared candidacy would carry more weight than an individual one, especially after the doctoral barrier Jeff had hinted at on the bus. Omar smiled politely, and Rick shrugged.

"You come from the arts," one of them said. "We work in political science. Different worlds."

"Besides," the other added, "we'll be assigned to a different city."

I understood that door was closing before it had even opened.

Months later, before we left, I confirmed that rumors about them had circulated in Tashkent: they shared an apartment, and speculation multiplied around that arrangement. As we had suspected, it was said that both of them considered her their lover, and that this constituted a scandal. And yet, when I saw them again, there was no visible sign of affection from Flor toward either of them. They, on the other hand, followed her with a constant, almost disciplined loyalty, as though that relationship—whatever its true nature—had settled into an entirely different register.

I met Helen, a Briton, and Franz Lennert, her Danish husband; the two of them had set up a center for

sociological studies in the south of Kyrgyzstan, funded by the U.S. State Department, the Danish government, and the Soros Foundation. The combination of funding sources already said a great deal about the kind of balance—or tension—they were trying to manage.

Helen held a notebook against her chest; Franz, quieter, watched with a sideways attentiveness, as though weighing each remark before deciding whether it was worth joining in.

"What's your specialty?" I asked.

"The European Union," Helen answered.

I couldn't help smiling.

"I can already picture the irony," she added at once.

"A Briton explaining the virtues of the European project."

"More than irony, it sounds like a professional contradiction."

"Contradictions are exactly the object of study," she replied, unfazed. "The European Union isn't a doctrine, it's a process. And processes are analyzed in their tensions, not in their slogans."

"And what exactly is being analyzed? Because from the outside it looks like a bloated bureaucratic structure that dilutes sovereignty without fully solving the problems it promises to fix."

Helen tilted her head slightly, as though mentally sorting out the lines of her answer.

"Three things are analyzed," she said. "Economic integration, political coordination, and democratic legitimacy. None of the three works perfectly, but together they've produced the longest stretch of stability among European powers."

"Relative stability," I cut in. "One could also say it's a peace subsidized by the American military umbrella."

"That's part of the geopolitical context, no doubt," she admitted. "But it doesn't invalidate the experiment. The question isn't whether the European Union is perfect, but whether it's preferable to the continent's historical

alternatives.”

“Alternatives like what? Nation-states competing against each other? That also produced growth.”

“And catastrophic wars,” she replied, without raising her voice. “Two in under thirty years.”

I gave a small gesture, conceding the point without handing it over entirely.

“Let’s talk economics, then,” I said. “Isn’t it true the single currency has created deep asymmetries between the countries of the north and the south?”

“That’s true,” Helen answered. “The euro benefits export economies like Germany more, and limits the ability of more fragile economies to adjust. But it’s also lowered transaction costs, made trade easier, and stabilized domestic markets.”

“At the cost of sacrificing monetary sovereignty?”

“At the cost of sharing it,” she corrected. “And that’s the central question: how much control states are willing to give up in exchange for stability.”

“And many aren’t willing,” I pressed. “Hence the euroscepticism.”

“Exactly,” she nodded. “Which is why it’s an interesting field of study.”

I watched her for a few seconds before shifting angles.

“I once had a student who was openly anti-European,” I said. “She argued that the European Central Bank imposed a financial discipline unrelated to local needs.”

“A fairly common argument,” Helen answered. “And often well made.”

“It wasn’t enough to convince me.”

“That depends on what you consider ‘convincing,’” she replied, a slight tension in her jaw. “In political science it isn’t about winning arguments, it’s about mapping them.”

“Even the most troubling ones?”

“Especially those.”

I let a second pass.

“Including texts like *Mein Kampf*?”

The question landed with a precision that wasn’t meant to be innocent.

Helen blinked, barely; she didn’t back away, but her posture tensed almost imperceptibly.

“As a historical document,” she answered, “yes.”

“And as a theoretical reference?”

“No,” she said clearly. “It’s studied to understand how narratives of power are built, not to legitimize them.”

“And yet you carry it with you,” I pressed.

Helen adjusted the notebook against her chest.

“I work on extremist political discourse,” she explained. “That book is an early example of how a total worldview gets built: an internal enemy, a promise of redemption, simplified language, constant emotional appeal.”

“And do you consider it necessary to read it directly? Wouldn’t secondary studies be enough?”

“Depends on the rigor you’re after,” she answered. “Interpretations filter things; primary sources are uncomfortable. And that discomfort is useful.”

“Useful to whom?” I asked. “Because from the outside it might look like a form of academic normalization of dangerous ideas.”

Helen held my gaze.

“The risk isn’t in studying dangerous ideas,” she said, “it’s in ignoring how they work. Ideologies don’t disappear just because we stop reading them.”

“They don’t disappear from reading them, either,” I countered.

I did not ignore that Helen was right about something essential: dangerous ideologies must be studied in their original language. Even so, I was unsettled by the almost clinical fascination with which certain Western

academics treated texts like *Mein Kampf*, as though evil could be reduced to a doctoral thesis. The propaganda techniques described in it had already been absorbed by nearly every contemporary system: in advertisements that reduce human desire to a slogan, in the media liturgy of the Cuban regime, in North Korea's emotional machinery, in Hugo Chávez's rhetoric since 1998, and in the new propaganda apparatuses of Nicaragua and Venezuela. The symbols change; what remains is the obsession with manufacturing emotional obedience. Hitler had systematized something humanity, unfortunately, went on to perfect with admirable creativity.

"But they become more visible," she answered. "And the invisible is always harder to fight."

Franz spoke for the first time, in a low, almost technical voice:

"The problem isn't the text," he said. "It's the context in which it's read."

I turned back to Helen.

"And what's that context here?" I asked, gesturing vaguely at our surroundings. "A center funded by Western powers, studying Europe from Central Asia... isn't there a narrative of power in that too?"

Helen gave a brief smile, more honest than warm.

"Of course there is," she said. "And it's also part of our object of study."

There was a short silence, charged with a tension that was no longer uncomfortable but productive.

"So then," I concluded, "your job is to study structures you yourself inhabit."

"Like teaching politics in the rubble of the world," she answered, "where only the professors who couldn't make it in the West ever end up."

"I see your greatest ambition in life is a high salary at a university that perpetuates the world's injustices," I said, with a nod of condescension.

"Remember, Marco is a film director," Franz cut in.

"So you're a poet..." Helen smiled, surprised, then spotted Petra waving her toward the buffet line and hurried off.

"A pity you two didn't hit it off," Franz said. "Forgive my wife for her cold remark; the truth is, those of us who live in this corner of the world are quite privileged. If you, for instance, go walking down the roads of this country and see a beautiful teenage girl on the way, all you need is to give her some bread and you can sleep with her."

My eyes widened in surprise.

"Seriously! She gives you her flower! But is that even possible anywhere in the West?"

Anaïs walked over, carrying a Manhattan and a piña colada.

"You've missed quite the heated conversation, mon amour," I said. "This is Franz, another political scientist."

"Enchanté!" Franz said, with a Nordic accent. "I daresay you two are the most charming couple at this opening conference."

"How kind of you!" Anaïs answered.

"Helen and I have a thousand-acre property on the border with Tajikistan, and we often invite new faculty to spend a weekend with us. Why don't you two coordinate a long weekend and come visit?"

"We wouldn't want to impose..." I said.

"Oh! It would be our pleasure to host you. Now, if you'll excuse me, my wife is calling me to the table. See you this afternoon!"

Franz walked off just as Anaïs arrived.

We had lunch with Venkatesh and Petra, who told us the Lennerts lived like Victorian-era British administrators.

"I went to visit them with a bottle of wine,"

Venkatesh said, "in a private car I hired in Osh..."

Venkatesh's story kept our lunch entertained to the point that I felt as though I'd stepped back into the pages of the *Thousand and One Nights*. Anaïs expressed interest in swimming in Lake Issyk-Kul, but Petra warned her it was thick with mercury, thanks to unchecked mining at its source rivers.

Anaïs invited me to take a nap before the three o'clock meeting. Lake Issyk-Kul was a turquoise mirror flanked by slender elms; drowsiness overtook me as I prepared to face the treacherous genie terrorizing the region.

The meeting was a tedious series of public presentations, in which each person had to practice the art of extolling their own achievements with the greatest possible modesty; the melody of that symphony was conducted by Jeff, Rachel, and Annula, who each delivered speeches showcasing their own particular variant of institutional rhetoric.

Jeff rose with that rigid posture of someone who had rehearsed the gesture in front of a mirror; he wore a conservatively cut navy blazer, a white shirt buttoned to the collar, a wine-colored tie with small golden diamonds barely visible, pearl-grey trousers pressed with a perfect crease, black leather shoes polished enough to reflect the room's lights; his brown hair was combed back with gel, revealing a broad, shiny forehead; he spoke with his hands clasped at his waist, as though praying before an invisible altar:

"Our presence here answers to a genuine commitment to human development; we have crossed oceans, navigated borders, adapted our bodies to extreme climates, all for a salary that barely covers our basic needs; far from diminishing our worth, this only magnifies it, for it proves that the spirit of service can prevail over any material circumstance; we are living witnesses that

philanthropy transcends personal gain, and that conviction sustains us whenever fatigue or homesickness sets in."

Rachel took the podium with a determined step; she wore a cream silk blouse with a Mao collar, a black pencil skirt reaching mid-calf, sheer nylon stockings, and burgundy patent leather heels; her blonde hair was pulled into a low bun, small pearl earrings, a steel wristwatch on her left wrist; her makeup was understated, pale pink lipstick, pearl-grey eyeshadow; she spoke slowly, enunciating each word as though it cost money:

"We must be realistic about our economic standing; working for an organization like the Soros Foundation means accepting that we will never accumulate wealth, that our names will never appear on lists of billionaires, that our material legacy will be modest; but that voluntary renunciation of personal enrichment is precisely our ethical strength; those who choose this path prove that motivations higher than capital exist, that social prestige can also be measured in terms of community impact, that personal fulfillment springs from sources other than a bank account."

Annula closed out the trio in an almost maternal tone; she wore a terracotta linen dress with a round neckline, a braided brown leather belt, flat leather sandals with a buckle, wooden bracelets on her right wrist, an amber beaded necklace; her dark hair fell in natural waves over her shoulders, with no apparent styling product; she spoke with open hands, broad gestures, as though embracing the whole audience:

"Cultural diversity is our foremost field of learning; we must approach local traditions with humility, recognize that practices we in the West would judge harshly carry complex historical roots, particular social contexts, internal logics that deserve understanding rather than condemnation; to respect is to observe, to listen, to contextualize, to resist the temptation to impose foreign standards on realities we do not fully understand; only

from that openness can we truly collaborate with real effectiveness.”

Petra whispered to us then that Annula was really talking about the bribes wealthy students paid their professors to pass courses without ever attending class.

By the pool we were introduced to Suhrab, a thin, calm young Kyrgyz man who reminded me of the heroes of Japanese cinema; he wore a white cotton t-shirt fitted to his torso, dark blue jeans worn through at the knees, khaki canvas sneakers with worn-out soles, a red thread bracelet on his left wrist; his black hair was cropped close, with a straight fringe falling over his forehead, thick straight eyebrows, dark, heavy-lidded eyes that gave him a contemplative look; he walked lightly, shoulders relaxed, hands in his pockets, like someone with time to spare.

Suhrab boasted of having received a scholarship to Indiana University at sixteen; his English was fluent, with an American accent, and he had absorbed that Anglo-Saxon practical sense that drives people to become entrepreneurs.

“I’ve started an English-language newspaper,” he told me, “where we translate the main news from the local papers...”

Suhrab felt as genuinely American as anyone I’d met in Central Asia, and that could just as easily win him great friendships as powerful enemies; either way, his work was admirable—he had decided to leverage his American experience to do business with Americans themselves; what was also remarkable was how quickly, after only a few exchanges, he moved straight into doing business with us.

“Would you be interested in subscribing?”

He was a kind of post-Soviet capitalist, if you could call him that, though I suspected he’d been shaped more by the environment he’d seen and absorbed in Indiana—that American entrepreneurial drive; his ambition struck me as legitimate, but was it really necessary to stay on top

of the news in a country where questioning politics was, precisely, quite dangerous?

I told him I’d think about it, while concluding that Suhrab could prove an unexpected ally; he knew the country, spoke English with ease, and understood the codes of that society better than most foreigners did.

I mentioned to him then the possibility of putting together a conference presentation together, for SEP.

“I don’t think that’s for me,” he answered. “I’m local; those opportunities are for you, the foreigners.”

“That’s a shame,” I said. “Your English is better than most of ours.”

He smiled with a calm confidence.

“Better than yours too. Forgive me for saying so.”

“You’re entirely right,” I answered, unoffended. “You hide your accent well.”

His remark didn’t amuse me, and it led me to conclude that, since our apartment had international channels, and neither Anaïs nor I cared much about the ups and downs of a plainly corrupt government, we would decline Suhrab’s translated news service.

Months later, visiting Travis’s house in Osh—an American professor with light eyes, twenty-six, who had been in Kyrgyzstan long enough to have earned a certain resignation toward his circumstances—I remembered Suhrab with a mix of fondness and skepticism. Travis described how the young man had hired him to correct the Russian-to-English translations he himself produced: a job whose flaws were so glaring that Travis ended up redoing almost everything, giving the texts that musicality and grammar only a native speaker could provide.

What surprised me wasn’t the arrangement itself, but Travis’s complaint: he pulled out some calculations, laid them on the table with the conviction of a union organizer, and showed me, figure by figure, that Suhrab was pocketing a considerable surplus value. That produced in me a curiosity I took a while to name: it was the unlikely

image of an American feeling exploited by a Kyrgyz, and in that reversal there was something that summed up, better than any analysis, exactly what Suhrab had managed to take away from Indiana.

"Are you Catholic?" a marsupial-looking woman asked me, with heavy bags under her eyes and a mass of grey hair sticking out like a broom. "I know a place I think you'll be interested in."

"Don't tell me you found a church," I answered, smiling.

"I did!" she exclaimed, with a strong Southern accent. "My name's Whitney, and I'm a devout Catholic. I'll be teaching anthropology. I heard you were Colombian."

"Have you been to Colombia?" I asked, taking in her sporty outfit.

"Peru," she answered. "Same thing. Oh, I know your people well!"

I was surprised her comment about my culture was identical to Parvaneh's. Were the assumptions of anthropologists in the US and Europe really so similar? Both, of course, were alluding to the stereotype about my ethnic group's promiscuity, but, beyond their casual familiarity with me, they believed they had cracked the secrets of everyone present, based purely on national origin. I inferred that, sooner or later, my anthropologist colleagues would collide.

"Have you been to London?" I asked.

"How did you know that?" she smiled, showing crooked teeth.

"Your line sounds like a colleague of yours."

"Ah!" she said, her face tensing. "I've heard of her."

Whitney invited us to her apartment that night, where we sampled a bottle of port Annula had bought for the occasion. Her rooms were noticeably more luxurious

than ours: the fossils of the Soviet Union seemed to have been expelled only from her building. New rugs covered the floor, an automatic washing machine gleamed in the kitchen, an aquarium lit up the living room, and enormous oak wardrobes replaced the old, decrepit furniture that decorated our own home.

I looked around with a mix of politeness and bewilderment.

"Well," I said. "Looks like you got the capitalist version of Central Asia."

Whitney let out a dry laugh.

"I suppose I got lucky."

I did not dare correct her; our apartment was bigger, yes, but also far more worn, deteriorated, and clearly abandoned for decades. The entrance to our building looked like the set of a failed revolution: unfinished walls, bare plaster, broken windows, and an administrative neglect that, months later, would reach grotesque levels—the dwelling of a dissident poet gradually losing his influence. At the time I still didn't know we would end up enduring even an arson attack—or, according to the official version, the product of monumental negligence in the electrical maintenance—and that, when we formally protested our living conditions, the institutional response would be a masterpiece of bureaucratic cynicism.

"The contract doesn't state we must provide apartments in optimal condition," they told me. "Only a suitable place to live."

"And you consider it suitable to live among broken glass and wiring that catches fire?" I asked.

On the other end I found only administrative silence and legal formulas repeated mechanically. My complaint was quickly reduced to a supposed envy toward Whitney, an American academic who, according to the institutional narrative, deserved greater consideration on account of her age.

"I'm nearly seventy," she would often repeat.

As though nationality and old age constituted higher ontological categories.

Our apartment, however, had something hers did not: an old Soviet piano leaning against a cracked wall. I studied it in silence for several minutes. It wasn't that I was obsessed with the piano; I had simply wanted to play it my whole life. My parents had bought a player piano years earlier for my sister and had never imagined I too might be interested in it. I remember protesting at the time.

"And why did you never think of me?" I had asked.

"If you want, we'll pay for lessons," they had answered.

I had turned down the offer at once, because it meant sacrificing my entire Saturdays, and, at that age, I preferred to attend the choir, where I sang surrounded by a hundred beautiful students from the Colegio de La Presentación—an experience that, for a teenager with simultaneously active mystical and hormonal inclinations, was the Garden of the Hesperides.

Even so, music always retained a spiritual dimension for me. When, years later, I read Schopenhauer, Hegel, and Fichte describing music as the highest of the arts, I felt no surprise at all. I already sensed it; music is the purest form of human abstraction: invisible, incorporeal, deeply emotional, and yet rigorously mathematical. That the Soviet Union had produced such a musical tradition amid its brutal political machinery was one of the twentieth century's most metaphysical statements—the creation of a truly free artistic body in the midst of so many chains.

Whitney waved her hand at me, pulling me out of my musings.

"Then you two should come with me to Mass."

Her Catholicism was, in truth, that of many performative Catholics: attending Mass with military discipline, memorizing liturgical protocols, policing other

people's sexual conduct, and publicly displaying an absolute loyalty to the Church that rarely translated into concrete acts of sacrifice for others. I discovered that many Americans could be more papist than the Pope himself.

"Moral discipline matters," she told me one morning while we were swimming.

"So does compassion," I answered.

Her time in Peru had come through one of those academic programs that let American professors travel to regions they consider exotic, teach for a few months, and return home with moralizing anecdotes. That same night she told me a disturbing scene.

"I visited a cemetery full of children's graves," she said, pouring more port. "Many had empty cans of Nestlé milk on top."

I looked at her in silence. She explained that companies had distributed free samples of powdered milk among extremely poor mothers; many stopped breastfeeding, and, once their own milk dried up, could no longer afford to buy new cans.

"The children died," she concluded. She said it with the same composure with which one comments on the weather.

"And what do you think of that?" I asked.

Whitney shrugged.

"That's how the world works."

That phrase produced an immediate revulsion in me. Did she belong to that class of people who acknowledge the existence of structural atrocities but would never risk their own comfort to confront them? Her anthropology operated under a similar logic: classifying cultures, simplifying behaviors, and turning entire peoples into quick diagnoses. Like Parvaneh, she specialized in decoding remote cultures like Latin America. Our region, in her view, was governed—per media stereotypes—by sensuality, infidelity, and emotional chaos. Both women joked about it with the same pseudo-scientific confidence

with which other eras once defended eugenics or racial theories now considered abhorrent.

Over time I noticed that Whitney cultivated an image of cosmopolitan philanthropy that slowly began to crack. First came the silences. Then the curt replies. Then she stopped looking at me directly. Every conversation had to pass through Anaïs. When Anaïs began to notice the pattern, she too distanced herself from her.

Later I mentioned to Whitney the possibility of submitting a joint conference proposal. Her face lit up immediately.

“Oh, that would be wonderful!”

For a few seconds I believed I had finally found an ally.

“There’s just one small point,” she added. “Neither you nor I have a doctorate.”

“That’s exactly the exception I want to break,” I answered. “Jeff left the door open if the proposal was brilliant.”

Whitney pressed her lips together.

“I’d have to speak with Jeff about it.”

I understood at once that this alliance, too, would go nowhere, and that if anyone traveled among those of us with master’s degrees, it would be her.

Our supposed friendship ended up revealing itself for what it truly was: shared taxi rides to church on Sundays, and to the sports center Tuesday and Thursday evenings, for hour-and-a-half swimming sessions and shallow conversations sustained by the illusion of belonging to a small, enlightened international community that was, in reality, full of invisible hierarchies, cultural resentments, and a remarkable moral hypocrisy.

We returned to Bishkek after a lavish dinner with the local and foreign faculty, one of those celebrations where everyone toasted Mr. Soros with an almost liturgical gratitude, not so much for the freedom of nations as for

the unexpectedly high quality of the banquets. The food had been excellent, served at a large restaurant downtown, and for a few hours it seemed as though we all—Kyrgyz, Russians, Americans, Europeans, Latin Americans—belonged to a single international brotherhood, held together by per diems, speeches, and plentiful wine.

8. A Dizzying Reception

And when good fortune comes, it comes scant and late
Lope de Vega

Bishkek, August 28, 2002

The bus taking us back from Aurora to Bishkek smelled of old leather and the cheap cologne of some SEP official who had slept two rows ahead of us the entire way. It was two in the morning; outside, Lake Issyk-Kul faded into the fog like an argument no one had ever quite finished making.

Anaïs rested her forehead against the glass. I watched her fingers laced together in her lap and thought about the conference, about Jeff's words on doctorates, about Darixa's smile as she announced the trips to Mongolia. What remained of all that was the taste of overripe fruit: something sweet that had turned sour too soon.

We reached Bishkek well into the morning, just as the naan vendors were setting up their stalls. The avenues stretched out among lights going dark, actors in a city that hadn't yet decided whether to wake up or keep sleeping.

The Aurora sanatorium, with all its contradictions, had been a space of appearances: marble, swimming pools, grand pianos. Here reigned the substance of neglect: the entrance to our building was besieged by a mountain of debris no one had cleared away in weeks. The elevator seemed a luxury in a city reluctant toward progress, one where, in these parts, it was invariably associated with the capitalist bourgeoisie.

We climbed the stairs; Anaïs stopped on the second landing, hand on her chest.

"Tired?" I asked.

"No; it's this dust."

The apartment greeted us with damp on the walls, fresh paint, pipes groaning in the small hours like sick animals. Anaïs opened the windows, and a cloud of grey dust drifted in. We left our bags in the hallway.

"Coffee?" I asked.

"Just water, thanks..."

We drank sitting on the sofa, which creaked with the complaint of worn-out springs. Anaïs closed her eyes. I traced maps of imaginary rivers in my mind, and then the Soviet piano against the guest room wall, the rugs we'd shoved into the closet because they gave off a smell of calcified dust.

"Why did they give us the biggest apartment if it's in worse shape than everyone else's?" Anaïs asked, without opening her eyes.

"Because we're French, and they think we don't care about personal cleanliness."

Anaïs laughed at my bit of English humor.

"Are you going to learn to play the piano? Petra told me we should go to one of the philharmonic's concerts at the town hall on Wednesday afternoons. You'll surely meet a pianist there."

"Excellent idea!"

"Mirbek told me the previous tenant left it behind when he fled to Moscow in a hurry."

Every night I ran my fingers over the closed lid of the instrument, feeling the accumulated dust; I had already confirmed it was out of tune.

"Judging by that stain on the wood, he must have dropped his last bottle of vodka on it as a farewell."

We took a three-hour nap, interrupted by the doorbell.

It was Misha, the teenager who had approached me at the park days earlier, or rather, a wrecked version of her; she was sitting on the stairwell landing, next to the broken glass a woman named Artemisa kept piling against the wall,

her left hand bleeding. Her dress—the same flowered one from our first meeting, now threadbare and stained—was torn at the shoulder.

I brought her into the apartment, leaving the door open. Anaïs emerged from the bedroom, her face still puffy with sleep, and stopped short at the sight of her.

“Is that the same...?”

“Misha,” I confirmed. “She needs first aid.”

Anaïs went to the kitchen without asking anything else. I sat the girl on the sofa and examined her hand; a superficial wound on the palm, probably from the glass on the landing. But what alarmed me was the state of her nails: broken, with dried blood in the cuticles, as though she’d been clawing at something.

Misha took the glass with both hands, drank thirstily, and let out a sob that seemed to have been building for hours.

“Nobody wants me,” she said.

It was the same phrase from our first conversation. But now it carried a different weight.

“Tell us,” I said.

“There was a man,” she said, speaking quickly, glancing at times at the wound on her hand, at others at the apartment’s open window, as though afraid someone might be listening. “A man who fed me in exchange for going out late with foreigners.”

She paused. Swallowed.

“One night, at the end of winter, he took me to one of the big hotels near Ala-Too Square.”

“Do you remember how you ended up there?” I asked.

“Not clearly.” She shook her head. “I only remember they gave me beer as soon as I got there. Then two old men appeared; they looked a lot alike, both with big moustaches, like brothers.”

“And then?”

“I remember steam from a tub of hot water. Music playing in another room. Glasses of vodka someone kept refilling. Yellow lights reflecting in the mirrors.”

Her voice broke slightly.

“And hands; hands helping take off my clothes while everyone laughed at something I didn’t quite understand. They’d given me some pills for a headache, and everything struck me as funny, honestly...”

“What happened after that?”

“After that...” She shrugged. “After that it all gets blurry.”

“Blurry how?”

“I’m not sure whether what I remember was from last night or from another night...”

“How did you wake up?”

“Alone; at dawn, in the courtyard behind the building, next to the trash containers.”

She meant those no-man’s-lands—or perhaps everyone’s-lands—that, thanks to that merciful laxity inherited from the Soviet era, still served as improvised bedrooms for beggars, rural migrants, and every kind of desperate person. Only someone entirely resigned against capitalism, hygiene, and luxury could, in fact, accept trash bags as a pillow and mounds of organic waste as a blanket; there was in that an extreme form of renunciation, an almost involuntary caricature of urban asceticism.

“Were you cold?”

“Yes.” She hugged herself. “Would you have a spare coat you could give me?”

I looked at her coat, with dried vomit stains on the lapel.

“The man who took you to the old men,” I pressed, “had you seen him before?”

“He’s a man of two worlds,” was all she said, walking into my apartment without waiting to be invited in. “Olaf, my pimp.”

She said all this in the same voice she’d used earlier

to talk about the man who fed her: no emphasis, with the lethargy of a weather-channel presenter.

"He feeds me," Misha said, noticing the surprise on my face, "and around here you have to do whatever you can to survive."

"I see," I said, noticing Anaïs's presence at the end of the hallway.

"Sometimes," Misha went on, "he finds foreign friends who, for one night of partying, give me enough to live on for a month or two."

"What foreigners?" I asked, with a hint of indignation.

"You'd be surprised if I told you," she sighed. "Several of them work at your university."

The mention of my workplace put me on guard.

"Do you like the partying?"

"No!" Misha said, sobbing, no doubt already aware of my wife's presence out of the corner of her eye. "I want to study!"

Anaïs strode forward and went to the kitchen; the tap ran for far too long. When she came back, her hands were shaking.

"Do you want to stay here?" she asked Misha, with a harshness I hadn't expected from her. "Is that what you're after?"

Misha looked at her with something like contempt, but too exhausted to hold on to it.

"I'm not after anything; I just wanted to clean this up."

She pointed at her wound, and Anaïs, visibly annoyed, turned and went to the bathroom, returning with our first-aid kit. I disinfected the wound with hydrogen peroxide and wrapped it with gauze and tape.

"Here, take this coat," Anaïs told her, handing over her old green winter coat.

Misha took it with a grateful bow, pressing her

hands together and nodding as though taking her leave, as if to say:

That's enough now; I'm going.

I gave her a hundred-som note; she took it without looking at it, tucked it into her neckline, and got up.

"Don't go back to that hotel," I told her, with a knowing smile.

She smiled for the first time: a facial contraction with no humor in it, no hope.

"You two are foreigners," she said. "You don't understand how this city works."

And she left, descending the stairs with a lightness that contradicted her appearance.

Anaïs closed the door. For a full minute neither of us spoke.

"We can't save her," she said finally.

"Why not?" I asked, knowing I was defying the whole world.

"We can't get involved either. If her protector has connections at the university, this could turn against us. Why did you give her money?"

"So she can eat today."

Anaïs shook her head, the gesture she used when she thought my idealism was really a disguised form of selfishness.

"They could say later you brought her here to sleep with both of us."

She had a point; I had been naïve. I nodded without arguing.

That night, while Anaïs slept, I thought I saw Misha standing at the window overlooking the shared garden, watching the darkness where the trash bags piled up.

Then I saw Vladimir's taxi in the parking lot and had the feeling he was watching me.

I went into the living room and drew the curtains, reaffirming, for the benefit of any watcher, the limits of my

charity toward her.

That episode with Misha left a lingering unease in me.

I walked through Bishkek for hours, trying to reconcile the visible sweetness of the city with the more discreet forms of neglect I was beginning to discover in it.

Bishkek, August 30, 2002

The next morning I went downstairs and found her in the building's corridor, near the stairs. The place smelled of damp, boiled cabbage, and cold dust. Artemisa, tall and heavysset, wrapped in her sky-blue coat, faded by too many winters, piled new fragments of glass against the wall with slow, methodical movements; she did it with the care of someone organizing valuable goods, not simple garbage.

"That glass is dangerous," I told her in Russian. "My wife cut herself on it; so did a girl from the building."

She kept arranging the broken bottles before answering.

"I collect it to sell."

"You don't really collect it; you pile it up. You leave it right by the stairs, where the children play."

Artemisa sighed faintly and raised toward me a pair of tired eyes, hardened by too many winters.

"Children need to learn to watch where they step."

"Not everyone can spend their life watching the ground."

She let out a short, rough laugh, almost indistinguishable from a cough.

"You foreigners always want everything to be safe, clean, new."

"I don't want luxury; I just want no one bleeding out in the hallway."

Artemisa let out a short, rough laugh, almost indistinguishable from a cough; then she picked up one of the glass fragments and held it up to the grey light falling

from the stairwell window.

"Safe'... That word means nothing here; here there's only one question: does it work, or doesn't it? To you this is trash; to me it's bread, sugar, coal for the winter. You see danger because you've never had to choose between danger and hunger."

I wanted to tell her I came from Colombia and knew disorder, precariousness, and improvised solutions rather well; but I understood at once that, to her, Colombia was a remote abstraction, almost an imaginary place uttered by a relatively well-dressed foreigner.

Artemisa kept stacking the fragments with slow, methodical movements.

"Things here don't have to be pretty; they just work or they don't. In winter people sleep wherever they can, sell whatever they find, burn whatever burns; you, who haven't really suffered, still believe life can be organized."

I did not answer such pristine arguments; she bent back over her task with a stubborn serenity; around her, the shards of glass gleamed under the corridor's dying light like small, transparent traps that no one—except foreigners—seemed to notice anymore.

What else can I say about this new world? I had endured so many warnings, so many bad omens before leaving Manchester, that I lived in a state of permanent distrust. The media dwelled, day after day, on the thesis that the next world war would begin in Central Asia, nest of Islamic extremism. But I go out into the street and blend into a society like any other; I turn the corner and smile at a woman selling shoro, a local yogurt made of wheat and goat fat that the Kyrgyz drink as a nutrient; too sour for my taste, but I've noticed Venkatesh and Gretchen sneaking sips of it. I walk to Bishkek's main intersection, the most congested part of the city, and take in those faces, so diverse, those eyes, that skin, which seem to imitate the porcelain figures in a German dollhouse. Begging children

surround me, and I attend to them with coins or small bills, though I sense in that joy the triumph of an absurd logic: the following week they will expect more, and I won't be able to hand over the treasure they dream of.

I discover cultural differences, of course, like no longer being able to kiss Anaïs in the street, but the Kyrgyz are, after all, human beings:

Homo sum. Nihil humani a me alienum puto.

In the midst of their poverty they show a sense of gratitude toward life; I see it in the way they offer their fruits and vegetables, with a condescension that carries me back to ages of iron and clay, when warriors armored in leather raised their spears against the gleam of dawn, their weapons flashing before the watchful eyes of their offspring and their women, a crowd sending them off from the mountaintop with a lament of shared exultation. Everyone recognized their own immortality: war and death were as frequent in their lives as illness is in ours.

Today was the ceremony marking the start of the academic year, at the Abdylas Malydybaev National Opera and Ballet Theater of Kyrgyzstan. President Daniel Weiler gave a tedious speech that was interrupted by a joke from Oleg Garshoski, his translator—clearly rehearsed in advance—which set off general laughter that dissolved the solemnity of the occasion.

Then came Tom, a middle-aged American, surrounded by students peppering him with academic questions. He answered with vague gestures while walking off arm in arm with a woman in her twenties. Just when he seemed to have gotten away, two particularly beautiful students broke off from the group, walked up to his office, and knocked discreetly.

Tom glanced both ways across the stage before letting them in. Seconds later came laughter, shrieks, and comic groans; he reappeared in his underwear, waving several bras while fleeing from three young women in

swimsuits. Students went back to pestering him about their grades, and Tom, without ever losing his smile, said that was exactly what the new professors were for, before vanishing again in their embrace.

Right after, Petra and Venkatesh came out through another door, handing out appliances and books to the students, while the audience burst into disproportionate laughter, as though everyone were in on a private joke we were only beginning to understand.

"I gave them complete freedom with their sketch," Tom said at the end of the performance, sharing a glass of champagne with the faculty.

"Of course, Tom," Venkatesh said, with apparent sincerity, "no one would ever take seriously the idea that you're one of those professors who rewards his female students with top grades in exchange for sexual favors."

"This guy only ever agrees with whoever admires the grandeur of his character," Parvaneh whispered in my ear.

By then we had already grown close over our shared, sharp read on our colleagues' particular interests.

On the way out, Anaïs and I walked the full length of Ala-Too Square; we found several bookshops with complete editions of the Russian classics; in one of them I leafed through the complete works of Tolstoy in twenty-seven volumes, including his correspondence. Seeing they cost barely twenty dollars, I bought them.

"This way I'll feel more committed to studying Russian," I explained to Anaïs, somewhat embarrassed.

"You don't have to explain yourself," she told me. "Your books are gateways to your own knowledge. Buy whatever you need."

"Mon amour!" I said, stroking her cheek.

We also saw, at an antique shop, a painted portrait of Comrade Stalin.

"I see they loved him," I said to Anaïs, admiring the delicately precise brushstrokes of his face against a

glowing red background. "I'd buy it, if I didn't associate it with so many atrocities."

Bishkek, August 30, 2002

That same afternoon, on my way back from the market, I saw Misha on the corner of Chuy Avenue, two blocks from the complex, in front of an appliance shop with a broken display window. She stood there, still, staring at a television in the window, like so many passersby silently calculating when they might have enough money to buy what they want.

I greeted her; she looked at me as though it took her a second to place me.

"How's the hand?" I asked.

"Fine," she said, and then, without transition, "The old man with the moustache is your president, and the other one, a professor. They work together."

I mulled this over, confirming my worst suspicions about Weiler.

"You could be like them," she went on. "It's a shame you're married to a woman who doesn't love you."

She walked off before I could answer, wearing that mischievous smile I kept insisting had nothing to do with her real nature.

I went up to the apartment without telling Anaïs what had happened, but as I climbed the stairs, avoiding Artemisa's shards of glass, I convinced myself of how ill-advised it would be to mention it.

"Doesn't that good-time girl want to sleep with you as a thank-you for all the attention you give her?" would have been her caustic remark.

The university welcomed me with an aggressiveness I hadn't expected, though Anaïs's predictions had already announced it.

I got to my classroom at eight sharp; it struck me as odd not to see students outside, and when I took hold

of the door handle I noticed the small nameplate on it was already ajar. I then heard a woman's voice explaining media theory in Russian, in the tone of someone who has explained the same thing for years. I gently pushed the door open.

A woman of about sixty-five sat at what should have been my desk, her white hair pulled into a tight bun, wearing a grey wool suit. She was speaking to my students as though she'd been doing it for months. The class listened to her with the particular attentiveness of those who'd rather not complicate their lives.

The woman looked at me, startled, and I even more so in return. She sputtered some xenophobic insults in Russian and, with a militant energy, grabbed my arm, marched me outside, and shut the door in my face. Loud laughter echoed down the hallway, where I stood, computer bag in hand, thinking about what to do next for a minute or two, unable to move.

I went looking for my elusive dean, Arkadina, in her third-floor office; she wasn't there. Her secretary told me the dean had gone to a meeting with Rector Gulmat.

"And my class? Why is another professor teaching it?"

The secretary consulted a green-covered planner, flipping through it with calculated slowness.

"Professor Ivanoff has special permission," she said finally.

"That's my course; my name is on the contract. I arrived at eight sharp..."

"She's also authorized," she repeated, as though repetition could resolve the contradiction, and, perhaps moved by my baffled expression, added, "Here, being on time means arriving half an hour early to your workplace."

I took a taxi to Annula's office. Her secretary made me wait twenty minutes standing in a hallway with no chairs. When she finally received me, Annula was seated behind a desk too large for her, turning a cup of tea

between her hands.

"Marco," she said, with the smile she used to open uncomfortable conversations. "How was the conference?"

"The conference was fine, but my class was hijacked."

"SEP has no jurisdiction over the dean's decisions," she said. "We only place instructors; the university manages the courses."

"You hired me; we agreed I would teach four courses."

"And you have them. In theory. Does it really bother you so much to be given free time, to enjoy your vacation?"

"I'm not a Soviet bureaucrat content just to sign for his paycheck."

Annula sighed, annoyed, and set the cup down on the desk. I then asked myself why I kept insisting on lighting a fire among people who wanted me off their farm. The clink of her porcelain cup against the glass was louder than it needed to be.

"There are tensions," she said, lowering her voice. "Between SEP and the university, between the university and the government; you arrived at a complicated moment."

She opened a drawer and pulled out a folder.

"Professor Ivanoff has twenty-three years of seniority. She's Kyrgyz, studied in Moscow, and has connections. Understand that without this course she'll lose her job..."

"And me?"

"You have a contract with SEP," she said, closing the folder. "That's not the same thing."

"What do you advise?"

She smiled, a mix of regret and cynicism.

"Speak with Aida, the administrative vice-rector, but be diplomatic: don't mention SEP, don't mention

racism. Say there's a misunderstanding you'd like to resolve. Because it's all just a misunderstanding, isn't it?"

"Until someone with power tells us otherwise..."

Aida received me in her office, a surprisingly small room for a vice-rector, crammed with metal filing cabinets threatening to topple onto her desk.

I laid out the situation: an administrative misunderstanding, a scheduling mix-up, my wish to cooperate. Aida listened without interrupting, fingers laced over a notepad on which she wrote nothing.

"Professor Ivanoff has priority," she said when I finished.

"Priority over an international contract?"

"SEP's agreement is a memorandum of understanding. It isn't binding for the assignment of specific courses."

"And your institutional need is to replace me with someone who doesn't have my training?"

Aida finally wrote something on her notepad. A single word, illegible from where I sat.

"That your method is demanding," she said. "That you expect too much. That you don't understand the local context."

"And Professor Ivanoff isn't demanding?"

"She's accommodating."

I left her office having gained nothing. In the corridor I ran into Magda, the psychology professor who worked with Dr. Utkin.

"Still haven't shaved?" she said, eyeing my chin.

"Don't look at me with such pity," I smiled.

"Arkadina is very pleased," she went on. "Professor Ivanoff is an old friend of hers. Same year of study in Moscow."

"Are you telling me this as information, or as a warning?"

Magda stepped closer. She smelled of cheap tobacco and a sickly-sweet perfume trying to mask it.

"Just curiosity. You're a curious one, aren't you? A Colombian who speaks Russian, who quotes Schopenhauer, who challenges the status quo."

"And you're very observant."

"I'm a psychologist. And your behavior suggests someone who doesn't know when to give up. Those who don't know when to give up tend to wear themselves out around here. Or wear everyone else out. And when everyone's worn out, someone has to give in. Usually it isn't the system."

"Unless we take after Socrates or Jesus Christ..."

She looked at me with fear in her eyes, realizing she was dealing with a character outside her jurisdiction, and walked off down the hallway, her heels clicking against the cracked linoleum.

I then went up to the third floor, where I found my dean meeting with Gulmat, our rector, a Kyrgyz matron dressed in a red and black suit. Arkadina is a woman with tousled black hair pulled into a bun, possessed of a look of resentment I've only ever encountered in the psychiatric wards of Hollywood nightmares. Skillfully, Arkadina softens her severity with a charming smile of a helpless little girl she puts on every thirty seconds.

"Do you also speak French?" Gulmat asked me, once we'd been introduced.

"I'm a French citizen," I answered.

"Have you worked in France?" she asked, unsettled.

"Actually, I'm here about Arkadina," I clarified, noticing her discomfort. "My course was hijacked by a professor who, I presume, is the same one you appointed before I arrived."

"That woman!" Arkadina exclaimed, glancing at her wristwatch, which appeared to be an imitation of a diamond-studded Rolex. "It's a three-hour class, so we can still catch the end of the second hour."

We went to the classroom, where Arkadina argued with the professor for several minutes. Eventually the woman gathered her things and left.

"It won't happen again," Arkadina said, in a tone that didn't convince me.

After a short break I prepared to teach my third class, in front of a group of exhausted, uninspired students.

The air in the classroom was stale, thick with the heat of twenty-four young bodies and the electric hum of a fan. The greenish glare of the fluorescent lights bounced off the students' eyes, lined up at worn desks that looked like trenches.

"My name is Marco Saint-André, communications graduate from the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, MFA in film and the arts, and..."

"We don't want you," a short redheaded boy interrupted me.

"Your name is..."

"Zernebog," I noted his fiery hair, like a lone ember in the darkness of the third row.

"This isn't about whether you want me or not," I repeated, walking with slow, rhythmic steps that made the wooden floor creak.

I stopped right beside the screen of the new forty-inch portable Sony television. The monitor's white glow lit up the profile of my leather jacket, forming a silvery outline that set me apart from the rest of the class. I gestured curtly at the glass tube:

"Look at this. It's a window, but it's also a guillotine. There are twenty-four of you today, but that screen only has room for one face at a time."

The silence became absolute. The students shifted in their seats, the rustle of their clothes sounding like a collective murmur of anxiety.

"This isn't about whether you want me or not," I lectured them. "It's about preparing you to fight that hydra that is the media. For every head it cuts off, two will grow

back. The only way to survive is to learn to scar over.”

My speech won them over even more when, apropos of the hydra, I recounted Hercules’s feats in the garden of the Hesperides and, according to some exegetes—and here I was making it all up—the present state of Kyrgyzstan.

That evening, around seven, I found Arkadina smoking in the back corridor of the Communications building. I was looking for a bathroom, since the offices had already closed; she stood by a windowless frame overlooking the inner courtyard, holding one of those Russian cigarettes almost no one smoked anymore. She hadn’t expected me. Nor did she pretend she wasn’t there.

“The bathroom’s at the far end,” she said.

I stopped anyway.

She wore an expression I had seen on her before: the administrative sternness from meetings, reinforced now by the cigarette between her fingers, her gaze fixed on the courtyard where broken boxes and a wheel-less bicycle had piled up, the same suit as always but with the collar unbuttoned.

“How long were you in America?” I asked.

She glanced at me sideways.

“I studied in Indiana in ninety-nine,” she said. “After everything fell apart. They offered me a scholarship and a thousand-dollar monthly stipend; at the time it was the best deal around.”

She said nothing more. She took a drag on the cigarette.

“And now?” I asked.

“Now I submit proposals to the American government,” she said. “I bought my apartment in ninety-three.”

She stubbed out the cigarette against the windowsill with a precise gesture, the kind of movement made a thousand times over.

“SEP arrives,” she said, without looking at me, “and hands out generous stipends to adventurous foreigners who travel the world to enrich themselves or, the more naïve ones, to fix it. But the university belongs to those of us who will keep being here, you understand? In a year, you’ll be somewhere else, talking about Kyrgyzstan in the past tense.”

She was simply telling me what she had watched happen, over and over, for thirteen years.

She walked off down the hallway without saying anything more. I stayed by the windowless frame, with the smell of Russian tobacco and abandoned courtyard, thinking that my remark about Socrates and Jesus had been a pebble tossed into the water of a calm pond that was already stirring into waves.

Bishkek, August 31, 2002

I was traveling toward an incandescent Being, and, as I dissolved, its nearness grew ever more serene. When I thought I had reached it, I expected to feel the satisfaction proper to any fulfilled goal, but I only glimpsed the barest thread of its essence. I kept moving forward, formless, passing through one reality after another, until I sensed my own harsh present, and even so, surrendered without resistance.

Then I was asked whether it wasn’t fair that others should share in that fullness. I turned my face and saw three women stifling groans of anguish; behind them stretched a multitude of female faces condemned, I understood, to repeat the same misfortune.

Moved, I answered that I wanted to help them; then I gradually returned, and cried out in regret. The fullness vanished and was replaced by the worries of the previous day. I woke with a start in our bedroom in Manchester.

“Last night I was about to die,” I told my wife.

Anaïs smiled then with that offhandedness I could

read as either disbelief or agreement. Only after a whole morning of musing did she understand what I had lived through, precisely because she too had experienced it, years before.

I remembered that dream this morning as we got ready for the trip; the connection unsettled me with that discomfort produced by intuitions one doesn't know how to classify, since the three women in the dream had been groaning in a stifled way, and that crowd behind them was destined to repeat their experience while I promised I wanted to help them. Had I traveled to the other end of the world to help Arkadina, that woman who acted so coldly toward me? An absurd hypothesis, and yet a persistent one, the kind dreams plant more stubbornly than any rational argument; so I grabbed my backpack, slammed the apartment door shut, and went down the stairs with my back turned on the question I did not want to answer.

The bus to Ala-Archa left early, before eight, with Mirbek at the wheel and Anaïs by the window, watching Bishkek dissolve behind us: first the grey concrete buildings, then the informal suburbs with their tiny gardens, then the open road, and, in the distance, the mountains we had seen from our window every morning without ever quite believing they were real. At that hour the light was still slanted and golden; the poplars lining the road filtered it into flickers that made us blink, and suddenly a gust of wind shook the bus so hard that Mirbek had to correct course with both hands on the wheel. Anaïs let out a small stifled cry; I laid my hand over hers without a word.

As we climbed the mountain road the air changed entirely, no longer smelling of dust and burnt gasoline but taking on that clean, cold density the high country has when the wind comes straight down off the snow. Anaïs rested her head on my shoulder while I watched the ridges of the Tian Shan, those celestial mountains that in Chinese

carry that name with full justice: at a certain hour of the morning their snowy peaks seem to belong to another plane of existence, suspended between the earth and a sky that, at these latitudes, holds a blue found nowhere else. Then a shadow crossed the windshield; I looked up and saw a golden eagle gliding no more than twenty meters above us, its wings spread and motionless, as though the wind held it up without any effort, its eyes fixed on something further down the road that I could not see.

Ala-Archa Park opens up all at once as you round the last bend in the road, for there is no transition whatsoever: one moment it's arid slopes with hunched shrubs and grey stones, and the next an amphitheater of peaks, waterfalls, and impossibly green meadows unfolds before you. Everything is framed by rock walls climbing vertically for thousands of meters, up to where the permanent snow covers their ridges like crystallized sugar; the Ak-Sai River runs through the center with that white, noisy urgency of glacier rivers, which do not flow so much as hurtle forward, having no patience to go around obstacles but instead striking them, leaping over them, and dragging them along. Mirbek braked sharply because a rock the size of a human head rolled down the slope and crossed the road just a few meters from the bus; the crash of metal against stone never happened, because he turned the wheel with a mountain driver's reflex, and Anaïs clutched my arm with a strength that surprised me.

"Mon Dieu," she whispered, and said nothing more, because nothing more was needed; then we got off the bus, and the eagle was still there, now perched on a grey rock at the edge of the path, its yellow eyes fixed on us with an intensity that raised the hair on the back of my neck. Mirbek crossed himself quickly, a gesture so automatic it looked more like superstition than faith, and I thought of the three women from the dream but pushed the thought away before it could take root.

The stable smelled of damp straw, leather, and that

particular scent of large animals, at once unsettling and reassuring. There were four or five horses in the stalls. A man of about fifty, sturdily built, his face weathered by the high-altitude sun, looked at us without surprise, as though foreigners arriving to ride his beasts were a kind of tourism no longer worth remarking on.

"Which one's the most spirited?" I asked.

The man pointed without hesitation toward the back of the stable. There, in the darkest stall, a black stallion looked at me with that sovereign indifference horses have when they've decided the human standing before them merits no particular attention. It was an extraordinary animal: its neck arched with the contained tension of a bow before releasing its arrow, its hind legs slightly bent as though it might spring at any moment, its dark, gleaming eyes holding something inside that wasn't exactly intelligence, but was ancient, and nameless.

Anaïs looked at it and took a step toward it.

"I'll ride it," she said.

Her determination chilled my blood. The man from the stable watched her with an expression mixing respect and alarm. Mirbek made a sound somewhere between a cough and a protest.

"Wouldn't it be better if you rode him?" he asked me nervously, not daring to address Anaïs directly. In that culture, women who decide to ride the most difficult horse in the stable are a category for which no established protocol exists.

I opened my mouth to intervene, but Anaïs was already inside the stall, stroking the stallion's muzzle with a gentleness the animal seemed to accept only grudgingly. The man from the stable watched her a few seconds longer, shrugged, and began saddling the animal with slow, meticulous movements, as though preparing a coffin.

They saddled her horse while I mounted the other, a brown one with whitish spots that seemed calmer but just

as strong. The sky had begun filling with grey clouds descending from the highest peaks like sheets unfurled from above. One of those clouds suddenly blocked the sun, and the whole valley turned a leaden color that made the green meadows look like they belonged to another planet.

Mirbek looked up and frowned. Then he said something in Kyrgyz that the stable man answered with a shrug, and I understood we were riding against the advice of the people who knew these mountains.

We set off just as the first drop of rain landed on my left hand. It was a fat, cold drop, the kind that foretells a downpour, not a polite drizzle. The black stallion began trotting the moment it felt the park's ground beneath its hooves, tossing its mane with a pent-up energy that betrayed its long days shut in the stable. Anaïs handled it well, her back straight, the reins firm, with that balance only years of habit can give. For a moment I thought everything would go fine.

The red-earth path wound between conifers and shrubs. The snow-capped peaks in the distance were vanishing behind a veil of rain advancing toward us like a liquid wall. The Ak-Sai River roared, invisible but present, and suddenly the golden eagle that had accompanied us from the valley appeared again, circling above our heads as though waiting for something.

And then Anaïs looked down.

The right stirrup hung crooked. It wasn't entirely loose: the strap was threaded wrong through the buckle, so that it held the weight but at the wrong angle. An error of centimeters. Years later, I would remember that image as one of those imperceptible cracks that decide the course of a life.

The rain began falling hard, soaking us within seconds. The horses' hooves slipped on the mud forming along the path. A gust of damp wind shook the trees until their branches creaked.

"The stirrups!" Anaïs shouted.

In that single word lay everything: the diagnosis, the fear, the plea for help.

I twisted around in the saddle. I saw the right stirrup hanging crooked. I saw Mirbek's face behind us, who had heard the shout and gone pale in a way that wasn't acting, or at least didn't look like it.

"They're wrongly fitted!" he confirmed, dismounting from his colt.

But a loose stone under his foot sent him crashing to his knees in the mud.

He fell with a muffled groan that could be heard even above the rain. The colt startled, whinnied, and bolted up the slope, its reins dragging across the stones.

The black horse had sensed something. The shift in his rider's weight. The tension in the reins. That microscopic disturbance in body language that horses read better than any human ever could.

It reacted with a sudden rear.

Its front legs cut through the rain-filled air like blades. Water streamed down its sinewy neck, mixed with foam. Anaïs clung to the mane, kept her balance for a second, two. But the right stirrup gave way completely. The strap slid free with a dry sound I barely heard.

It wasn't a dramatic movie-style bolt. It was worse. The stallion came down on all four legs at once—a fall that shouldn't have happened, that defied the whole mechanics of a gallop—and then shot forward in a straight line toward the river. Its frantic gallop splattered mud in every direction, and the rain hit our faces with a violence that forced my eyes shut.

Anaïs was off-center. One foot out of the stirrup. The reins in a single hand. Her body fought against the momentum of the runaway animal, and each jolt pushed her a little further to one side.

I spurred my brown horse with a violence that

surprised even me. My heels struck its flanks with a force I didn't know I had. The horse answered with a sharp whinny that vanished into the roar of the water. Its gallop grew faster than I would have thought possible.

I saw Anaïs's back. I saw the distance between us, barely closing, because the black stallion was running faster than my brown one. I saw the path which, forty meters ahead, stopped being a path and became the edge of a gorge above the river.

A sheer drop of several meters. The white rocks of the Ak-Sai below. The water, swollen by the rain, murky and furious.

A low cloud engulfed us. Visibility dropped to barely ten meters. I could hear the black stallion's hooves, but I couldn't quite see it: only a darker shadow within the grey fog, moving at a speed that didn't seem real.

The eagle skimmed low right over our heads. It flew so close I heard the whistle of air through its feathers. Then it vanished into the cloud.

The gorge appeared before us like an open wound in the earth.

It was then that something happened that I still, to this day, cannot fully understand. The black stallion, which had been galloping in a straight line toward the void, stopped right at the very edge of the precipice. Its front legs dug into the ground with a force that made its tendons crack. The animal's chest slammed into the embankment with a muffled blow that seemed to come from far away. Loose rocks fell into the void. I heard the echo of their fall long after I'd lost sight of their white flashes.

Anaïs shot forward.

Her body arched over the horse's neck. For an instant I saw her suspended in the black air of the storm. The rain fell through her. The eagle passed by again.

My hand found hers: chance, to the skeptics; providence, to the believers. My arm stretched out exactly as far as it needed to, and my fingers closed on their own,

independent of my will; I gripped her with the intensity of someone who knows he'll have only one chance, with no delicacy, no technique, only the tenacity of that primate still living inside us since the age when we had to leap from branch to branch to escape the lion and the hyena waiting below for our final fall.

The pull I gave to bring her up onto the saddle in front of me was rough, almost cruel, and tore from Anaïs's throat a short, choked cry I still remember with total clarity. She was on my horse now. Her arms clung to my back; her breath against the nape of my neck came fast, broken, hot despite the cold rain.

The brown horse took two steps back. Its hooves searched for solid ground and found it.

The rain stopped as suddenly as it had begun.

A ray of sunlight broke through the clouds tearing apart over the peaks. The eagle rose on a thermal, circled once above us, and vanished behind the mountain. The black stallion grazed calmly three meters from the edge, as though nothing had happened. Its black tail swished with indifference.

Anaïs trembled against my back. I felt her fingers dug into my waist. I felt her damp breath on my neck. I felt her heartbeat against my spine, so fast I couldn't tell one beat from the next.

Mirbek came running up. His face was a map of mud and blood. He had no horse. He had fallen either trying to mount the runaway colt, or trying to run after us, or slipping in the mud. A cut on his forehead was bleeding, mixing with the rainwater and running down his cheek like a second, open mouth.

"An accident," he said, panting. His lungs whistled as he breathed. "This has never happened before. Never."

I looked at him.

The sun warmed my soaked back. The river kept roaring below. Anaïs had a pain in her leg—I could tell by

the way her body leaned more on one side than the other—but she said nothing.

Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe the stirrups were simply misadjusted. Maybe the man at the stable hadn't done his job properly, and there was no intention behind any of it. Maybe, in a city where someone had already tried to run me over near the Opera Theater, I was reading conspiracies where there was only human negligence, that more common, sadder form of evil.

"Let's go down," I said.

I added nothing more. Because I knew that if I started saying what I was thinking, I wouldn't be able to stop, and that this was neither the time nor the place.

I dismounted and helped Anaïs down. Her right leg couldn't bear any weight. I had to hold her up while Mirbek went for help, while the man from the stable arrived with a blanket, while someone made a phone call and the afternoon filled with voices I didn't understand. All of that happened, I know, but I don't remember it.

We went back to the horse-rental hut amid a general sense of relief; the incident made us the day's protagonists, and on our way out we spoke with a hunter proudly displaying his falcon. We took photos with Anaïs's new digital camera.

What I remember of her afterward is the feeling of her hand in mine. The coldness of her fingers. The strength with which she squeezed it when we finally sat down in the back of the truck that carried us back to the valley, giving her the assurance that, clinging to me, she would never suffer.

"I'm fine," she said at one point, when the road grew rougher and the vehicle jolted, making her groan in pain.

"You're not."

"I'm alive," she corrected.

And she was right. She was alive.

That night, in the apartment, as I treated the

scrapes on her leg with hydrogen peroxide and gauze, she looked at me with an expression I had never seen before.

"Do you think it was an accident?" she asked.

I stopped my hand. The gauze suspended over her knee. The hydrogen peroxide barely fizzed on the wound.

"I don't know," I answered. "But I'm not going to find out. Not for now."

Anaïs nodded. She closed her eyes. She rested her head against the back of the sofa.

"That's what they want," she said. "For us not to find out anything."

I didn't answer. I kept tending to her wounds in silence, thinking that sometimes the only way to survive a place is not to understand it fully. That understanding, in Bishkek, was a luxury we could perhaps not afford.

Outside, the storm had passed. The sky was clear. The stars, which in Central Asia seem closer than anywhere else, shone over the city with an intensity that almost hurt.

Anaïs fell asleep on the sofa. I sat on the floor, my back against the wall, watching the door bolted shut. I couldn't stop thinking about the stirrup. About the badly threaded strap. About the way the black stallion had stopped right at the very edge of the gorge—a nervous, runaway animal, suddenly halting as though an invisible hand had been placed against its chest.

I thought about the eagle. About its yellow eyes. About the way it had flown by right as my hand found Anaïs's.

I don't believe in omens. But that night, while the city slept and I stayed awake, I wondered whether there was someone—or something—watching us from above. And whether that watching was a threat, or a form of protection.

I never found out. I never will.

9. In Kafka's Labyrinth

At these latitudes the sun turns violet and yellow in the afternoons; my body, if not my spirit, recovers under its warmth after surviving, for two years, the overcast skies of northern England.

The strawberries are small, but sweet as nectar. Life can be pleasantly simple: yesterday we went to the city market, a true bazaar out of the Thousand and One Nights, where I bought ten kilos of plums for five cents, and a new Russian grammar book for barely three dollars.

Wandering through those aisles of spices, housewares, and vegetables became a whole outing with Gretchen, Petra, Venkatesh, Parvaneh, and Whitney. At one point a thief tried to steal Gretchen's wallet, which she kept in the bag on her back, but the uneasy look on a vendor's face told me to turn around: the scoundrel was trying to open her bag's zipper without her noticing.

I shouted at him, and the rascal's eyes widened just slightly before he bolted.

We took some photos and shared a coffee; Petra then told us how she had once packed two thousand dollars in her luggage, which never arrived at its destination.

"Whoever runs the X-ray machines on the luggage," I said, "surely has contacts among those who go through the suitcases."

We talked about the horse incident from that morning.

"It was surely an accident," Petra grumbled, always reluctant to face any conflict that might disturb her full, happy life.

"As long as there's no second accident," I answered.

Back home I told Anaïs that none of our colleagues

inspired much confidence in me.

"They're all chasing perks," I said. "None of them would lift a finger for anyone else."

"I think it's far too early to judge them."

I sighed, resigned; this was still the time before the flu had fully taken hold of our lives.

"If Kyrgyzstan isn't going to be our paradise," I said, "let it at least be our refuge; every morning I cover you and myself in the blood of Jesus Christ so that no harm comes to us."

Back in our apartment I read that, since early morning, Venkatesh had sent an email to every member of our NGO, challenging us to answer two questions: who was the source of the phrase "history will absolve me," and who had written a certain famous passage about the difference between stillness in peacetime and imitating the tiger's action once the blast of war sounds.

I was surprised that, by nightfall, none of our colleagues had answered his questions, so I sent an email, copying the members of our fledgling community, letting Venkatesh know that the first quote belonged to the serial killer Fidel Castro, who used it to intimidate Fulgencio Batista—with regrettable success—and that the second passage was Shakespeare's; and adding that, though Fidel is regarded as a hero in these parts, a close look at his biography reveals a bureaucrat who murdered thousands of peasants simply for refusing to hand over their land, enriching himself at the expense of impoverishing an island that had once been among the great economies of the world.

Bishkek, September 1, 2002

Today, Sunday morning, we went to Dordoi, the famous duty-free market on the outskirts of Bishkek; a desert lot parceled out into tents. We bought various trinkets and items for the apartment's kitchen and cleaning.

The bigger surprise was the sudden appearance of Derogan, boyfriend—or, as they prefer to call it in our NGO, Life Partner—of Petra. The two of them made for a contrast that produced instant laughter: she, tall, blonde, and lanky; he, short, about twenty-five, nearly lost in the crowd, with very dark skin—a tone that, as he himself was quick to explain, had once been grounds for prejudice within certain social hierarchies in India, before his doctorate in Chicago finally freed him from all that.

He dressed with an almost ceremonial care: tight black jeans, a belt with a shiny buckle, a leather jacket, a maroon shirt unbuttoned one notch too many to show off a thin gold chain, and a watch far too ostentatious for that dusty market. His loafers kicked up small clouds of dust as he walked, clinging to Petra's arm.

His outfit, impeccable and expensive, clashed with that landscape of makeshift tents. More than elegance, it projected a too-visible need to prove he had definitively escaped the place he came from.

Before we could ask about his Indian ancestry, he told us he was from Chicago, where he had earned a doctorate in economics.

"We thought you were a bodybuilder," Anaïs remarked, guilelessly.

We laughed at her unexpected compliment while I tried, mentally, to reconcile the hours demanded by the gym, the doctorate, and Petra.

Had he really read as much as his diploma suggested? I wondered, somewhat skeptically.

"Will you be teaching a course?" I asked, feigning innocence.

"I can't! I'm only vacationing for a couple of months."

"But we already talked with Annula about him giving several lectures in Mongolia," Petra added, with a faint note of superiority.

"He could give a few here too."

"Anaïs already teaches in the MBA program," Derogan replied. "My expertise isn't needed here."

"Since you mention it, I'd like to ask you about the University of Chicago's methodology," Anaïs said.

"I'll go with Marco to look at cameras," Petra announced and, pulling me away from the group, steered me into the aisles leading to the clothing section.

Once alone, Petra warned me that, in case I hadn't noticed, Derogan's parents belonged to the Dalit diaspora.

"Any reference to his ancestors isn't a good idea," she told me. "He already had a rough time with Whitney, that bitter Southerner who can't accept there are Americans of Indian descent."

"Indians are the best students in American schools, from what I've heard."

"Can you believe she dared ask him, in my presence, whether his parents were going to marry him off to a girl from India?"

"Maybe she meant it as a favor," I said, playing devil's advocate.

"A bitter woman only wants to embitter those she sees happy"—and, abruptly changing the subject, she went on—"I do congratulate you for answering Venkatesh's questions. After all, you're Latin American, and you know all about Fidel."

"You'd be surprised how much ignorance there is in my country about that tyrant," I said. "Some consider him a role model, starting with Gabriel García Márquez."

"You always surprise me with your cynicism about your own culture. Fidel Castro is a celebrated figure here and in Europe."

"If he was able to seduce Marilyn Monroe... The poor woman ended up revealing state secrets to him, and after the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion, they had no choice but to have her killed."

"Where did you read that?" she snapped, with an

irritated look.

"Nowhere. I deduced it from fairly well-known facts."

"Ah! The fruit of your poetic imagination..."

I decided her impertinence about my country of birth deserved compensating with a bold dose of interest in her personal life.

"Are you two planning to marry?"

"Hm?" She looked at me, surprised.

"You and Derogan."

"I don't know," she answered, in a strained voice. "His family is against it."

"I'm not surprised. I know Indian traditions."

"Isn't he beautiful?"

I nearly burst out laughing, thinking she was joking about her fiancé; but, seeing her yearning eyes, I understood Petra was blind with love.

"All Indian men are," she added. "They're the most beautiful creatures on the face of the earth."

"In Colombia they say that about Frenchwomen," I answered, "and in Philadelphia, that we Latin Americans are. It's all a matter of taste..."

"And what is taste?"

"Kant already wrote about that," I answered with such confidence that Petra seemed intimidated by her own ignorance.

She dropped her romantic praises, and we set about looking at cameras, but I showed her their quality was poor, so we went back to the group empty-handed.

Back in the city, Venkatesh treated us to a bottle of vodka he promised would leave no hangover. After two rounds of drinks, Petra asked us, loudly, who we thought were the most handsome men in the world.

"I couldn't say," I answered, ignoring our earlier conversation. "What I can say is that French women have been, and remain, the most beautiful women in the world."

"Merci," Anaïs said, blinking and tilting her head,

“mon prince charmant.”

“I’m talking about men,” Petra insisted, visibly annoyed.

“Latin Americans,” Anaïs answered, taking my arm.

“Wrong answer,” Petra corrected her. “Indian men! Don’t we have right here two slender men, well-built, with coppery skin and delicate features?”

“Doesn’t that make you jealous?” I asked Derogan, pointing at Venkatesh.

My laughter faded before the icy silence of the two Anglo-Saxons of Asian descent.

That night we went to a bar for a round of beers with the new anthropologists: Gretchen, Whitney, and Parvaneh. Amid statues of Russian writers, Gretchen asked Whitney about her courses, and Parvaneh cut in to hold forth on the educational shortcomings of the locals.

“They never learned to doubt,” she said, “and they never question their professors.”

“That hasn’t been my experience,” Whitney snapped, her blonde hair, from her African ancestry, bristling in every direction.

She wore, as always, her armor of causes: a thick, hand-knit wool scarf bought from a women’s cooperative in Oaxaca, a worn cloth bag with a Palestinian flag print barely visible beneath the handle, Birkenstock sandals with wool socks despite the heat, and a bottle-green corduroy blazer that had seen better days but to which she remained as loyal as one remains to one’s principles. It was the clothing of someone who wants to be seen believing.

“Because you’re American, you don’t notice,” Parvaneh said, smiling sarcastically. “Have any of your ideas ever really been challenged?”

Parvaneh was her bourgeois nemesis; she wore a slate-grey linen suit, the jacket perfectly buttoned over a cream silk blouse, and a fine scarf knotted at her neck with

the precise geometry of someone who knows every detail is an argument. On her fingers, two gold rings: one on the index finger, one on the ring finger, both inherited, neither merely decorative. Her handbag on the chair, structured, dark, English. It was the clothing of someone who has decided, once and for all, that she has nothing left to prove.

“Of course!” Whitney answered.

“About what?”

Whitney hesitated for a moment.

“I’m not going to answer to an Iranian who...”

“Don’t play the ethnic card,” Parvaneh laughed. “The Civil War’s already been lost.”

“When are we going back to the sanatorium?” Anaïs cut in, in an effort to head off the escalating argument.

“I’d love to travel with you two,” Whitney said gratefully.

Parvaneh let her off the hook for a moment, with the patience of someone who knows exactly when to resume her attack. She ordered another round without consulting anyone, waited for the waiter to walk away, and reorganized her fronts.

“And your research?” she said, with the kindness of a scalpel. “I understand you have a much-discussed doctoral thesis.”

“It’s field research on hunger in the third world,” Whitney said, and something in her voice settled, like someone finding solid ground. “And yours? I understand that’s what earned you your doctorate...”

“And it was published by a British press, dear,” Parvaneh nodded, pleased. “It’s about social mobility, consumption, urban identity, caught between state pressure and the aspirations of globalization.”

“What a... safe topic,” Whitney said.

“Safe?”

“The middle class.” Whitney slowly turned her glass between her fingers. “No serious anthropologist has

ever wanted to study it. And there are reasons for that: it's the status quo. It's what we see in newspapers, in TV shows, in urban planning manuals. It's what we all take for granted. Studying the middle class is doing ethnography of what the system considers normal. It is, with all due respect, doing the system's work for it."

"That's not a theoretical argument," Parvaneh said. "It's a pose."

"A bourgeois tradition; but anthropology was born to give a voice to those who don't have one. To those crushed by hegemonic discourse. To minorities, to the abandoned, to those no one looks at because looking at them is uncomfortable. That's what I studied, that's what I teach, and that's the only thing I find intellectually honest."

"Have you published a book on the subject?" Parvaneh said, and her voice now had an edge that hadn't been there between them before.

"I'm not a theory woman," Whitney replied, with a defiant look. "I prefer fieldwork. Living in London with a doctorate but no university willing to hire you isn't really my thing, dear."

Parvaneh went pale; Whitney had struck her, cruelly and skillfully, in her most sensitive wound.

"It's true it's hard to find, these days in London, a PhD who'd aspire to work at a Bible Belt college, the way you do, dear Whitney."

Whitney's eyes widened at her colleague's venomous defense, which had risen like a scorpion's tail, embedding itself in her jugular and leaving her mute for a few moments.

"I agree with Whitney," Gretchen cut in. "Writing about the Iranian middle class from London is just as monotonous as it would be for me to write about the well-off German class. The poor and minorities will always be more interesting..."

"Which poverty is photogenic enough?" Parvaneh replied, turning to face this unexpected second front. "Which minority exotic enough to justify the plane ticket and the State Department grant?"

"I don't live off influence," Gretchen shot back. "My fieldwork has been extensive and rigorous."

"I never said it wasn't. I said you theorize from Frankfurt."

"From a university that's part of the very same system you claim to be questioning?" Whitney cut in, her eyes red with anger.

Parvaneh didn't blink, but something in her gold rings stopped moving.

"And you?" she said. "Where do you theorize from? From an American university with federal funding? On a grant from a foundation whose money comes from the same corporations that exploit that Iranian middle class you're so interested in?"

"Neither of us is free of contradictions, Whitney," Gretchen said. "But I think the Iranian revolution has its merits, just as the Cuban one does, or any other, even the Bolshevik one."

"The difference is that I don't pretend to be free of contradictions," Parvaneh answered quickly.

A brief silence seemed to prove her right.

"The Iranian middle class," Whitney went on, more slowly, with a precision that seemed rehearsed but wasn't, "not inside Iran."

"It's a class that negotiates its existence under state surveillance," Parvaneh corrected her, "the memory of the revolution, and the promise of a world that reaches it by satellite and by smuggling. It's a class that knows perfectly well when to speak and when to stay quiet, when to show itself and when to disappear. That is not normalcy, my dear colleagues. That is exactly the crack where the things that matter happen."

Anaïs looked at her with genuine admiration,

persuaded at last by her argument.

"The revolution," she added, very still, "is a wall my family still lives against. But Whitney, with her Oaxaca scarf, and Gretchen, with her designer glasses, come to me in their internationalist solidarity to tell me that revolution has something to teach us about resisting hegemonic power."

The silence that followed was of a different nature. Anaïs looked at the table. Gretchen looked at Anaïs, and she looked at me.

"I'm not ashamed of having defended the Iranian revolution," Whitney said, and her voice now carried something different, not exactly regret but a kind of inner shift. "I have respect for those who live within its consequences."

"And I tell you," Parvaneh answered, "that those of us who live within its consequences don't need people to come study us from outside with the best intentions in the world. That's what I want my students to learn: to be self-sufficient. To see themselves. Not to wait for some American on a grant to explain to them who they are."

"That," Whitney said, "is exactly what I want too; for no English colonialist to come impose her creed, and, above all, for people to understand that, since Geertz, the fact that someone writes a book and publishes it gives them no authority over someone who, like me, prefers to travel and talk with people as her anthropological work."

"I think the same!" Gretchen cut in. "That's why I don't share Marco's enthusiasm for studying dead languages, as I've already told him."

"I disagree," I replied, "because there's too much beauty in those texts that are still alive."

"I agree with him," Parvaneh said, thus splitting the bar into two camps.

It was as close to a truce as either of them was willing to call it.

What Whitney did not say, because she still hadn't quite found the words for it, was that she deeply regretted not having pursued a doctorate herself, simply because she had never liked studying, reading, or writing. Parvaneh, in her view, embodied the conviction that reading-and-writing intelligence outranked the kinetic kind.

Petra arrived just then and told us about her trip to Dordoi with renewed energy, which dissolved the earlier tensions.

On the way home we were invited to a presidential event in Ala-Too Square that morning. I wore my green suit and one of my ties. In the paperwork attached to the contract there was a note mentioning the growing importance of international academics in the political life of Kyrgyzstan; I certainly couldn't risk being introduced to the President dressed like a tourist. On our way out I noticed Anaïs was wearing a miniskirt and sandals.

"And that outfit?" I asked her.

"It's summer," she said, by way of justification.

"But it's a presidential event," I objected.

"We're not going to see the President."

I looked at her doubtfully.

"Or are we?" she added, impatiently.

"Just in case!" I said.

When we arrived, the President was on his platform, surrounded by politicians, circled by guards, with the full width of the square between his podium and where we were standing.

"And what's with that elegance?" Annula laughed, lifting her sunglasses.

I noticed she and Whitney were wearing shorts and sleeveless t-shirts.

"I thought we'd be seeing the President..." I apologized.

"And Anaïs in athletic wear?" Whitney said behind us, bursting into laughter.

"Definitely," Annula concluded, in a pitying tone

that confirmed her prejudices about our marriage, “you two are very, very different.”

That afternoon I had my first piano lesson with Damira, a thin Soviet woman with intensely pale blue eyes, who, in keeping with Glasnost-era fashion, wore a polo shirt and nineties-style jeans. She could hardly be more than thirty, but her expression was that of someone who expects nothing ahead but a monotonous, uncertain life. She plays violin in the philharmonic orchestra, which is how she knows Dorothy. When we mentioned Dorothy would be leaving for Cambridge, she was surprised.

“That can’t be!” she exclaimed. “We rehearsed yesterday, and she didn’t say a word about it.”

“British discretion,” I remarked, conciliatory.

“I’ll call her,” she said, regaining her composure. “She promised to help me apply for a scholarship to study music in London.”

Our finances are stable, but fragile. The cost of shipping our belongings exceeded the budget SEP gave us.

Bishkek, September 2, 2002

That afternoon I spoke with Arkadina.

“Would you be willing to teach a course for our faculty?” she asked me.

“Of course,” I nodded. “That’s why I came all the way from England.”

“For now you have two courses. But come to a meeting with the other professors tomorrow. That number could change!”

I’m also attending a Russian course, Monday through Friday; my teacher, Filipa, is fifty, sturdily built, with a stern face. Her hair is dyed an impeccable red; she carries her books under her arm with the firmness of someone conveying deep convictions; the whole class runs under her authority.

I introduced myself as a French citizen; I had the

passport I’d obtained in London, though what drove me more was the aesthetic pleasure of causing surprise. Being Latin American was predictable; French identity, on the other hand, opened a crack of freedom in other people’s expectations. Filipa, however, spotted my real origin by the trace of my accent.

She recalled the golden years of the language department in Frunze, when workers enjoyed sustenance, clothing, and access to culture. Her present reality forces her to hold down two jobs to get by; the opera has become an onerous luxury. I asked her why she had stayed in the country after independence.

“I am Kyrgyz, and my soul remains in this land,” she said, calmly; her parents had been journalists exiled during the Stalinist era, and had found here their final home. Over time, she told me her whole story in fragments shared between grammar exercises; Filipa had once tried to fully integrate into Moscow society.

She polished her accent until it became indistinguishable from that of Muscovites; she took pride in that constructed identity, which she wore almost like a second skin. Moscow taught her how insufficient such an effort was; the Kyrgyz suffered the condescension of those who consider themselves the center of the world. The smallest gesture gave her away as an outsider.

She then accepted that her origin was, in itself, something of value; she returned to claim her rightful place in her own homeland. The phenomenon of independence turned out to be paradoxical: many descendants of Russians tried to return to Russia, only to be met with suspicion and rejection. The Kyrgyz government, meanwhile, needed their vast experience.

“I already know Moscow, and they reject us there,” Filipa declared; those close to her fake foreign accents to keep their jobs in the Russian capital. She said she had moved past that need for outside approval; then, with her characteristic precision, she picked up the thread of our

earlier conversation and asked me about my own French nationality.

I explained that I had obtained the document through my marriage, processed at the consulate in London; she wanted to know whether I had ever worked in France.

"Of course," I answered with confidence; my claim was true, though some might hold differing interpretations of what counts as formal employment.

Ulysse, my wife Anaïs's grandfather, kept a mirabelle plum distillery in his garden in the Franche-Comté; the summer air there carried the scent of fermented fruit. I helped him during vacations, from 1998 to 2001; I fed the fire and regulated the temperatures through the process. I tasted that strong, clear liquor, which stirred memories of experiences I had never actually had.

That work was, to me, genuine labor; I gave my hands, my attention, and my time to a task shared with another human being. Anaïs later scolded me for having lied about my work experience in France; I chose to stay silent under her reproach, since she inhabited a reality governed exclusively by official forms.

The world has its own coordinates; these often clash with people's personal perceptions. Those of us who choose to move according to our own map are often branded insane. I accept that label with total lightness of spirit; I prefer the freedom of my imagination to the servitude of convention.

The people we interact with each day are very kind, and even the poorest carry themselves with a dignity a Westerner would find hard to grasp. Here it would be indecent to offer a peasant money for a photograph. Communism, in fact, is remembered with nostalgia. People had everything they needed, and since the fall of the Soviet Union, life has grown harder. I wrote an email to my professor Chuck, in Philadelphia; from his ironic reply I

gather that his distrust of anything Soviet keeps him from appreciating my judgments.

"I hope, with so much praise, they don't ship you off to Norilsk," he said, referring to one of the coldest cities in the world.

As I suspected, caution keeps American academics away from these parts of the world.

My efforts to get Anaïs teaching work were settled that afternoon, in my conversation with Jeff.

I had just finished lunch when the phone rang.

"Do you have a moment?" he asked.

There was something different in his voice, unlike his usual academic-director cadence.

"I found Anaïs's diploma," I said before he could explain the reason for his call. "It's valid in both the United States and France; from the Center for International Finance at the University of Paris."

"Why didn't you say so before?" he said.

"We didn't have time last Saturday; besides, you should keep in mind she never finished her doctorate."

There was a brief pause; when he spoke again, his voice had a friendlier cadence.

"Naturally, we're looking for people with experience at both a European and an American level. Tell your wife to go to the business school. They'll welcome her with open arms..."

"Excellent!"

"But she'll only be paid the local salary," he clarified, "which isn't much: about fifty dollars a month per course."

"And how many courses could she teach?"

"I'd say four. That would be two hundred dollars a month; not a great deal, but it's experience."

"Something is better than nothing."

"And about the doctorate she didn't finish," he added, "don't worry, that's the least of it. What matters here is that she's taken courses. Most of the professors who

come from the United States have only done one semester's worth of coursework, and they're already teaching with that."

Before hanging up, he lowered his voice a little.

"Oh, and one more thing. The faculty meeting you were invited to: be careful. Not everyone there is an enemy, but they're not friends either. There are tensions I can't explain to you openly, but you're smart enough to figure out what's going on beneath the surface. Avoid trouble."

I hung up. Anaïs, who had been listening from the doorway, looked at me.

"What did he say?"

I summed it up for her: the school, the salary, the four courses.

She didn't answer right away. She sat at the table and held her cup with both hands, watching the steam rise.

"They're not going to hire me," she said, finally.

"Jeff says they will."

"Jeff isn't the school." She shook her head. "I don't have a master's, I never finished the doctorate. How am I supposed to teach in an MBA program?"

"With eight semesters of a doctorate in statistics," I said.

"That I never finished."

"That you're pursuing," I corrected her.

Anaïs set the cup down on the table. What was on her face wasn't bitterness, but the integrity of someone who doesn't want to occupy a place she feels isn't hers.

"My ethics won't let me present myself as something I'm not."

I fell silent, knowing that argument wasn't one to be won with words; the steam from the coffee rose between us. Outside, Chuy Avenue was already starting its morning noise.

"Come on," I said finally. "At least let's go ask."

Bishkek, September 3, 2002

The biggest obstacle was Anaïs herself; when they offered her a teaching position in the MBA program, she replied that she didn't hold a master's degree.

"It doesn't matter," the department secretary told her, more than once, with a smile that tried, in vain, to reassure her.

Fortunately, I arrived just as I was picking her up after class; I insisted, in French, that she had completed almost eight semesters of a doctorate in statistics, and that she could contribute enormously to the education of that generation of future managers. Anaïs repeated her usual arguments.

Finally I asked the secretary for the list of the program's faculty, and when she handed me a brochure detailing their credentials, I pointed out that most of them had barely a bachelor's degree, with a handful of independent courses taken in Indiana. Faced with such clear evidence, she agreed, and this very morning gave her first statistics class at the University.

The fact that she isn't a graduated doctor matters less to them than the Temple University seal on her business degree. Her pay will be for three courses: a hundred and fifty dollars a month.

Today we walked to a Turkish restaurant recommended to us, just a few blocks from our apartment, and they truly do serve the best roast lamb loin I've tasted in Bishkek.

On our way home the streets blurred before us against that hazy blue backdrop that is the Tian Shan range, the celestial mountains, as the name means in Chinese. Its design is almost architectural, its peaks overlapping one another until they form the most compact wall I know, a fitting stage for a last judgment.

It was the tail end of summer, and the wind carried the scent of spices and ripe fruit as we made our way back around five in the afternoon from shopping at the bazaar.

10. Franco-Colombian Academic

Bishkek, September 4, 2002

Before my Russian class I talked literature with Marcello Novák, who is progressing in our course at a superhuman pace. He speaks with his hands, unusual for a Czech; his fingers sketch the words in the air before they leave his mouth. He takes notes in tiny, almost illegible handwriting, but when he looks up to ask a question, his green eyes are fully present; he's the best in the class—he never makes a declension mistake—and the only one who reads the supplementary texts. While the rest of us memorize imperfectly, he translates.

"Russian is as close to Czech as Portuguese is to Spanish," he says, by way of explanation.

He makes no secret of his fascination with Latin American culture; he told me about music, about rhythms, about something he'd seen on MTV.

"Those girls really know how to move their hips!" he told me, narrowing his eyes, with a smile that mixed genuine admiration with a touch of the envy temperate climates feel toward those of us who, in Camus's words, get to enjoy the sun.

We talked afterward about Kafka. I told him I'd spent weeks trying to actually start teaching at the faculty that had hired me: the stamps, the counters, the officials who kept referring me to other officials; that chain that never reached any final link.

"This University really is *The Castle*," I told him. "You never know who's actually running it. K. will never find the owner of the citadel, because the citadel simply eludes him. But the problem isn't the bureaucracy; it's that K. doesn't fully look for him either, because his own society doesn't even let him imagine that he could be the

owner of his own life.”

Marcello nodded slowly, with the expression of someone recognizing something he already knew but had never put into words.

“Kafka was a civil servant,” he said, “which is not a minor detail.”

“True,” I paused. “He was the castle, seen from inside. That’s why he knew it so well; he even wrote his book like Ariadne’s thread; therein lies the delirium, or the paradox, that eventually set him free.”

I told him then about another citadel; I said the same figure repeated itself, on another scale, with God: that someday God incarnate would walk into the Vatican and try to speak with the Pope, and, in the process, would suffer through the hierarchies, discovering they were just as illusory as the belief that man could ever free himself from immortality, and that this whole architecture of power is, at best, a very old, very worked mirror, reflecting something not found in the building itself but in its imitation of the Creator’s omnipotence.

“And at worst?” Marcello asked.

“At worst, it’s just stone; the Vatican is a stone because it can no longer believe in God; if the institution truly kept its faith, it would have to dissolve at once, because then it would point toward divinity as residing in each believer’s inner soul. The permanence of the walls betrays the absence of the spirit; therefore, the architecture survives only as a monument to emptiness. The hierarchical structure prefers its own solidity to the truth of the invisible.”

He fell silent for a moment; through the hallway window one could see the courtyard, where students were having a leisurely lunch.

“So the difference,” he said, “isn’t in the Vatican; it’s in the man who walks in.”

“As in every one of Kafka’s stories; except for his

one finished novel, *The Trial*, where the persecuted man discovers, as Hamlet did, as Seneca did, as Hume did, that all disgrace can be ended with a simple blade. God doesn’t live in the dome; he lives, if anywhere, in the one who looks up at it and, for one second, stops needing someone else to explain what he sees.”

Marcello’s gaze went back to the courtyard, where the students’ everyday life ignored the weight of our conversation; his remark about the man who walks in shifted the focus from the temple to the observer. The reference to Kafka felt essential; his stories tend to suffocate the individual in bureaucratic labyrinths with no center and no exit. The mention of *The Trial* and Seneca’s blade suggested that final sovereignty rests in the will of the subject; whoever understands that institutional power is an architecture that only holds up so long as man grants it authority over his own life.

“God does not dwell beneath the dome,” I concluded, watching someone else’s lunch, “he resides, if anywhere, in whoever raises his eyes and does without interpreters to understand the sacred. Absolute freedom shows itself in that instant of pure perception, in which the individual ceases to be a subject of dogma; then the building recovers its nature as an inert object. The architecture of the Vatican, like Kafka’s castle, feeds on the believer’s need for explanation; but once that dependence disappears, the stone stops being a destination and becomes an unnecessary landscape.”

The parallel with Hamlet, or with Hume, underscores that identity does not depend on external hierarchies but on the inner soul; the dome is merely a frame for an experience that always occurs in solitude. Therefore, true dissolution requires no picks, no shovels, only a gaze that no longer seeks answers in marble; for the man who discovers his own divinity renders the building invisible. The disgrace of administrative mediation ends where the autonomy of the spirit begins; there, where the

self recognizes itself as the sole origin and end of its own consciousness.

Marcello smiled; it was the smile of a student who has just confirmed that the theorem also works outside the classroom.

"I'm going to take an independent study next semester," he told me. "I'll request that it be with you."

When the authorities got wind of his intentions, they talked him out of it with arguments he never shared with me; that would happen four months later, by which point my name was already tied to trouble throughout the university.

On my way home, Misha was waiting for me, sitting on a bench, knees against her chest, staring fixedly at the dirt ground.

"Could you get me something to eat?" she asked, eyes tearful; her voice was so low it seemed to be apologizing for existing.

I took her to the corner shop; walking beside me, I noticed the soles of her shoes had come loose and that the jacket Anaïs had given her, though clean, already showed the wear of many nights spent outdoors. I ordered two naan and a glass of milk; she took them with trembling hands.

"How old are you?" I asked.

"Fifteen," she said, and the number sounded like a lie told so many times it had almost become believable, even to her.

"I thought you were younger," I said, not daring to admit I'd guessed twenty-two.

"People always tell me that," she answered, taking bites of the bread with a slowness that wasn't hunger but the fear it would run out too soon.

I watched her drink the milk in small sips, as though each one were a luxury she didn't quite deserve. In her eyes there was something I recognized immediately:

that mix of gratitude and shame I've seen in the beggars of Porto, in the children on the outskirts of Bucaramanga, in the women begging in front of the Bogotá cathedral. Poverty exists everywhere, I thought, but only on some faces do you read the certainty that no one is coming to rescue them.

"Where do you sleep?" I asked her.

"Nearby," she said, without giving further details; I understood she meant our dumpster.

She finished the bread and the glass, and for an instant her fingers brushed the empty rim as though trying to draw out one last drop of warmth. I said goodbye with a pat on the shoulder, and she walked off without looking back, like someone who has learned that final goodbyes hurt less when you fake indifference.

On my way to the apartment I wondered what had become of Ricardo, the beggar in Porto whom I also used to feed on my way home from work; he'd tell me about his childhood in Coimbra while I bought him a hot soup. One day he stopped showing up on his corner, and no one could tell me whether he'd been moved, admitted to a nursing home, or simply died.

"I want us to adopt a Russian girl," I told Anaïs, hours later, while she was chopping onions in the kitchen.

"Adopt whom?" she asked me, her eyes so wide the knife hung suspended in midair.

"Misha," I answered. "The girl who sits at the entrance to the complex."

Anaïs set the knife down on the cutting board and wiped her hands on her apron; she said nothing for several seconds, and in her silence I could guess she was running through every possible objection.

"The blonde teenager," she said, finally, and her tone wasn't a question, but a confirmation.

I nodded. Anaïs focused on the soup, stirring the ladle with deliberate slowness; after a long pause she looked at me with something between tenderness and

exasperation.

"I don't know where you get these absurd ideas," she said. "That girl is already legally an adult, and she's not an orphan; she has a family, however precarious. Did she ask you to adopt her?"

"No," I answered, "but think of the good we could do her by giving her French citizenship. She could study, work, get off the street..."

"Oh, la la!" Anaïs said, with that impatient air she reserves for my most generous and reckless projects. "And what do you think people will say about a thirty-three-year-old father with a twenty-year-old girl who also happens to be a prostitute and uses opium?"

The word "companion" fell between us like a slab of stone. She didn't need to be more explicit.

"By 'people' you mean your mother?" I answered, knowing it was a low blow but unable to stop myself.

Anaïs raised her left eyebrow, that unmistakable sign that her patience was gone; she picked up her plates and went to the kitchen, where she washed the dishes with a clatter that echoed through the whole apartment. The water ran for a long time; I stayed at the table, listening to the cutlery clinking against the steel.

"Fine," I told her as we went to bed, already nearly in the dark. "You're right. Let's let God keep taking care of that poor girl."

Bishkek, September 5, 2002

In the morning I went to buy milk and naan, as has become my habit. The shopkeeper, an Uzbek man with a thick moustache who eyed me with distrust the first few weeks, now greets me with a nod. I arranged with him to pay a hundred soms a week in exchange for Misha's breakfast; he didn't ask me why, or what my relationship with the girl was, he simply wrote the debt down in a grease-stained notebook.

"Have her come pick it up herself," he said, smiling. "It'll be enough for her to mention her credentials—the Franco-Colombian academic's girl."

I nodded and left with the naan and the bag of milk, feeling that Bishkek was starting to teach me things no Russian textbook contained. Anaïs won't know, I tell myself as I walk back; and even if she finds out, she won't have the heart to reproach me for it. There are acts of insurgency that conscience demands and that marital reason can only forgive after the fact.

Around noon we had the faculty meeting Arkadina had called under the excuse of coordinating the semester's content. From the doorway, the atmosphere was already dense: chairs arranged in a circle, notebooks closed, faces avoiding each other's eyes. It smelled of reheated coffee, and of the tension that precedes an ambush.

Magda, a woman of about fifty with her hair pulled into a bun so tight it seemed to stretch her cheekbones, took the floor before Arkadina could even declare the session open. To her left, a grey-bearded man—Nicolai, from the Sociology department—nodded along with every one of her sentences, arms crossed over his chest. Across from me, a young woman—Irina, the newest member of the group—stared at the table intently, as though the knuckles of her hands were more interesting than any discussion.

"How is it possible that Mrs. Ivanoff lost her media direction course?" Magda bellowed, her fingers striking the table as though each blow were a hammer strike on a coffin.

"Ask him," Arkadina said, and her chin pointed in my direction with an almost choreographed precision.

Every face turned toward me; my gaze brushed past Magda's look of contempt, the secretary's raised eyebrows, the poorly hidden shock of the two young professors, who hadn't expected to witness a public lynching. Nicolai nodded in silent approval. Irina glanced

up for a second and lowered her eyes at once.

Then Yuri, a professor of about fifty who had never spoken to me before, cleared his throat.

"With all due respect," he said, his voice trembling slightly, "Professor Saint-André holds a terminal master's degree and has publications. Mrs. Ivanoff does not."

Magda shot him a withering look. Arkadina wrote something in her notebook. Yuri, clearly appointed devil's advocate, shrank into his chair and didn't open his mouth again for the rest of the meeting.

"I'm sorry about what happened," I said in Russian, weighing every word, "but I didn't come all this way to occupy a terrace; I came to teach the courses I was hired for."

The silence that followed was the kind measured in heartbeats. Magda's mouth opened as though she'd been slapped, and my colleagues' faces grew dark, offended not so much by what I'd said but by how I'd said it: without the ritual hypocrisy that faculty meetings demand as currency. My honesty had wounded them because it reminded them that, deep down, they all thought the same thing: yes, it was true that most Europeans or Americans who come to Bishkek aren't looking for work but for rest and women; yes, it was true that I had made an unusual effort in demanding four courses instead of the mandatory minimum. But saying it out loud was a betrayal of the tacit pact that bound them together: the pact of pretending everyone was there out of vocation, and not out of need.

"Aren't you also a poet?" Magda asked, and now there was a different edge in her voice, more personal, as though searching for a wound she hadn't yet found. I understood then that the word "poet" on her lips was not a title but an insult: someone who lives outside reality, who doesn't understand the rules of everyday survival. At a university where every post is defended tooth and nail, poetry is heresy.

"Why do you say that?" I asked, intrigued.

"I was told you bought Tolstoy's complete works."

"I see," I said, surprised; the bookseller on the corner, I thought, must be a relative or acquaintance of this woman. In a small city, every thread leads back to the same ball of yarn.

"Why don't you focus on writing about your own life's misfortunes?" Magda snapped, and this time she didn't hide her smile; she wanted to see me bleed.

"My colleagues are wasting their time," I said, rising from my chair, "when, through their scheming poems, they preach the meaninglessness of life or the absurdity of their own existence. I haven't come here to complain; I've come to work."

My defiant expression brought the meeting to a close. Arkadina said nothing more; she only wrote something in her notebook, her handwriting so tiny it looked like hieroglyphics.

I stepped out into the hallway with the certainty that, for now, I am the villain of this story: a heartless Westerner who has come to snatch a job away from a defenseless Kyrgyz woman. No one will appreciate that I studied film in the United States, or that I've taught in Portugal and Manchester; certainly no one will bother reading my essays—already available online—or watching my short films. Merit will never be up for debate, because doing so would just as easily call into question the deepest-rooted prejudices of their own lives: that Latin Americans should stick to romantic entanglements and never to *sui generis* academic posts; that Russians are racially superior to any dark-skinned ethnic group; that Marco Saint-André studies Russian so diligently only because he can't find a decent job in the West.

"I'm Gulmira," a stunning Kyrgyz young woman told me as I left the classroom, olive-skinned, wasp-waisted, with a face round as the moon. Her voice was a whisper that seemed rehearsed, and her eyes, black and

shining, ran over me from head to toe with a slowness that left no room for doubt. "Is it true you studied in Philadelphia?"

I nodded, admiring her complexion; it had that matte glow only found in women who have drunk green tea since childhood.

"I also lived in Indiana for a year," she added, in a perfect American accent, drawing out her vowels like a PBS news anchor. "Shall we get a coffee?"

Before answering, a question crossed my tongue, driven by that mix of curiosity and provocation so characteristic of me.

"What did the woman in the portrait at the entrance to the faculty die of?"

Gulmira made no effort to hide her confusion; she blinked three times in a row, as though my question were a riddle with no solution.

"The one in the formal dress," I insisted, pointing toward the lobby.

"Elvira!" she suddenly exclaimed, relief tinging her voice comically. "Yes, a tragic story. She was the former dean of the Department of Philology and Social Communication."

"And," I said, leaning slightly toward her, "what happened?"

"She died of indigestion," she answered matter-of-factly, as though that were the most common epitaph in the world.

"When?"

"At the end of last year. She ate a rotten fish fillet at the Christmas dinner. Nothing could be done; the doctor arrived too late, and she was already blue."

I nodded, thinking back to reports of poisonings during the Stalinist era. I wondered whether my colleagues might also try to poison me.

Gulmira parted her lips and took a step toward me;

her perfume was intense, white flowers and something musky.

"And you?" she said, her voice dropping to something almost intimate. "Are you happy with your wife?"

I thought about confessing our marital troubles—the arguments over Misha, Anaïs's silence when she hangs up after calling her mother, that invisible crack that has been widening between us ever since we arrived in Bishkek—but I held back with a smile. From her gleaming, moist gaze, I could tell she was picturing us making love on the floor, next to the piano. I thought then of Tolstoy, of Plato, and also of my own past in Philadelphia: three lovers, three years of trouble. No, I would not answer that siren's call.

"Very happy," I answered, and my voice came out steadier than I felt. "I'm a one-woman man. Since I only teach four hours a week, I devour books on the history of American mass media nonstop and rewrite my short stories, just as I predicted in my interview. It doesn't matter where in the world we live: ideas, poetry, and imagination will be our sustenance."

Gulmira smiled, but there was something in her eyes that wasn't defeat, only patience. She walked away with a sway of the hips that seemed to say the opposite of what my ears had just heard.

Bishkek, September 6, 2002

We haven't even been on this continent a month, and the setbacks never stop. Will I only find peace, literally, in the grave? Arkadina hasn't stopped scheming against me, and this morning I got definitive proof of it.

My students, twenty-three young men and women between eighteen and twenty-two, asked me at the start of class to suspend the theory and teach a practical course on audiovisual media management; they argued, with a suspicious fervor, that the previous classes had been

excessively organizational and that they needed concrete tools for the job market. I reluctantly agreed and had them run a mock newspaper: they had to publish a complete edition in one hour, with sections, headlines, and at least three invented interviews.

Everyone shouted, buzzed with energy, laughed, and congratulated each other when it was done. And I applauded them. Bravo! Bravissimo! But the predominance, in my view, of practice over theory—along with the obvious gaps in historical and conceptual knowledge that it revealed—led me to reject that methodological approach for the rest of the semester.

Only Leo and Laurica, two lanky students who sat in the front row and took notes with monastic devotion, seemed interested in reading the classic communication texts by Adorno, McLuhan, and Chomsky. The rest, I could see it in their eyes, just wanted to pass with the least effort possible.

Leo and Laurica had already surprised me in previous classes: he, with his discreetly gay elegance, which some classmates whispered disapproval of; she, too diligent to be liked by the rest. Both took notes as though every sentence were exam material, but in their questions—always precise, always uncomfortable—one could tell they were after something more than grades. Even so, I wasn't fooled: at this university, the sharpest students sell themselves to the highest bidder. Today they support Ivanoff because she promises them easy grades; tomorrow they'll support me if I manage to bring them contacts in Europe. Leo and Laurica were no better and no worse than the rest; only more skilled at disguising their calculation.

Isaac Nevok, on the other hand, watched me from the back row, arms crossed. In the previous class he'd openly challenged me:

"Why does an adopted Frenchman come to teach

us about our own media?"

He didn't like my presence there, and his rejection wasn't academic but political: to him, I represented the Western interference he had learned to denounce during his years of youthful activism.

Half an hour later, while I was going over some notes in my office, Arkadina walked in without knocking. In her hand was a torn sheet of notebook paper, its edges crumpled, covered in hurried handwriting.

"The students have signed this," she said, her voice carrying a poorly hidden satisfaction. "They believe their acting improvisations are necessary for their professional development. You should definitely hand your course over to Professor Ivanoff."

I took the sheet and read it. Twenty-three signatures. Some of the handwriting was so shaky it looked as though it had been written under pressure. There were no dates, no letterhead, no proper channel that could validate this document as anything more than a page torn from a notebook.

It was a slight tremble in her jaw—that small muscular spasm that comes from holding back a smile—that revealed her whole scheme to me. Every meeting, every complaint, every consultation with the students had been orchestrated by her to present me with an illusion of democratic superiority: the good dean who listens to her students, the bad professor who ignores their needs. Understanding that her show of concern was part of a badly performed theatrical comedy, I told Arkadina I would take this matter to another level.

In my indignation, I went up to the third floor and contacted Aida, the administrative vice-rector, a sixty-year-old woman with grey hair pulled into a bun and black plastic-framed glasses that gave her the air of a Soviet governess. Aida listened to me without interrupting, jotted down a few details in a notebook, asked me to wait outside, and called Arkadina in behind closed doors.

Ten minutes later she invited me back in. Arkadina was sitting in a chair, hands folded in her lap, staring fixedly at some indeterminate point on the wall.

"Students need to push themselves," Aida said, and her voice carried the weight of someone unaccustomed to repeating herself. "If Professor Saint-André is demanding, they need to be capable of demanding the same of themselves. We are not here to hand out degrees for free."

Arkadina nodded with a gesture that couldn't hide her irritation; her fingers clenched until her knuckles turned white.

"Besides," Aida added, looking at me now, "I've reviewed your file and Mrs. Ivanoff's. You have publications, international experience, and a terminal degree. She has nothing more than a 1976 undergraduate degree. The matter is closed."

I left the office with a bittersweet victory. I had won the battle, but I knew Arkadina did not forgive; in a post-Soviet city, debts are collected with interest.

The SEP staff backed me by evening, though with nuances that revealed their own internal tensions. Annula, the program director, stopped me in the hallway as I was coming back from the photocopier.

"I see this is a case of racism!" she exclaimed, walking beside me through Dubovy Park, among stone Soviet statues staring east with their empty eyes. "And, that being the case, I will look into it personally!"

She then recalled some bitter experience of rejection because of her dark skin—an episode at a Texas university, if I remember right, where she'd been denied access to a laboratory—and added, her voice trembling:

"This is extremely serious!"

"It's an ethical problem," I remarked. "Students must respect the authority each professor holds over their own subject. If tomorrow a group of students decides they don't like the calculus syllabus, no one would swap out

their professor."

Annula nodded energetically, but then glanced at her watch, and her expression changed entirely.

"I have to get to the supermarket before it closes," she cut in, with an impatient gesture that instantly wiped away all her earlier solidarity.

And she left, leaving me alone among the statues, certain that her support, like nearly everyone's at this university, was as solid as the fading night.

It must have been around seven when, taking a detour to avoid the main avenue, I realized I'd gone the wrong way. I doubled back along a shortcut through the dark, deserted streets of the industrial district; the streetlamps flickered with an orange light that barely managed to cast shadows. I heard a murmur of low voices and hid behind the trunk of an old tree. Then I saw a group of three men pass by, among whom I recognized Dagerovich, the vice-rectory official who always greeted me with an overly wide smile. They walked hurriedly, heads down, coats pulled up to their ears. One of them carried a metal briefcase.

Some secret police operation, I thought, and quickened my pace toward home.

When I got there, Anaïs told me about her first class with the undergraduate economics students. She was sitting at the kitchen table, a cup of tea gone cold in her hands, and in her eyes was a mix of pride and unease I'd never seen in her before.

"There's one who's very handsome," she told me, and her tone was so neutral I understood at once that the matter bothered her. "His name's Oleg, he's in Political Studies but somehow got enrolled in my course. Turns out he's the group's leader, and he's the leader because his mother, Annika, is one of the University president's lovers."

I nodded, picturing the harem Weiler had assembled in Bishkek.

"Now I understand why Daniel Weiler was so permissive with that boy at the opening lecture of the semester," I remarked, remembering how the academic director had let Oleg mock him without a word of protest, and then, according to rumor, had let him swap three courses outside the official registration period.

"He wouldn't stop courting me during class," Anaïs went on, her voice cracking slightly. "His remarks were subtle at first: how well you speak English, professor; what an interesting jacket. Then they got more direct: does your husband really understand you? A woman of your talent deserves someone who admires her the way she deserves, someone with a six-pack, built like me. I ignored him for two hours, but at the start of the third I told the class, without looking directly at him, that if I heard one more compliment, I would report him for sexual harassment."

She paused and took a sip of cold tea.

"Then Oleg smiled," she added. "He wasn't offended. He wasn't embarrassed. He just smiled, as though he'd gotten exactly the reaction he was hoping for. I realized he wasn't trying to seduce me; he was trying to get me to react. So he could go say afterward that the French professor had humiliated him in front of everyone. To have a story to tell at the vice-rectory."

Her eyes trembled; the tea spilled a little on the table. I held her tightly, feeling her breath speed up against my chest.

"It's just like the Soviet Union," I comforted her. "They want to accuse us of adultery, or at least plant enough doubt to weaken us. Oleg isn't a student; he's an instrument. Annika placed him in your class specifically to provoke this."

"And what if Weiler already knows?" Anaïs asked, and her voice carried a fear I'd never heard from her before. "What if this whole story about the mistress and

the president isn't a secret, but an alibi? If something happens, they'll say Oleg is just an insolent student and that I'm a paranoid professor."

"That's exactly why we won't give them anything," I said. "You won't react. You won't answer him. If Oleg tries to court you again, you'll ignore him like a fly. And I'll talk to Weiler, but not to complain; to ask him, quite innocently, how he handles, back in his own country, students who confuse the classroom with a dating club."

Anaïs looked at me for a long while, then rested her head on my shoulder.

"Don't do it..."

"Remember your premonition," I said. "You're going to be fine."

"And you?" I saw in her eyes a terror that alarmed me, because it wasn't fear of Oleg or of the bureaucracy, but fear of being widowed in a foreign country.

"If you're fine, I'm fine. The opposite is impossible, isn't it?"

Anaïs sighed, uneasy.

"I have a will shaped by the Gospels," I added, stroking her hair, "and I won't let them destroy this opportunity for knowledge and spiritual growth for both of us."

She looked up and quoted Frisoni to me with a sad smile:

"Les grands hommes sont soucieux d'éthique, les petits d'étiquette."

When I asked Arkadina to sort out my academic courses—a procedure that should have been simple, and which she kept dragging out with increasingly far-fetched excuses—Ulrika, dean of the English faculty, intercepted me in the hallway and asked me to teach three elective courses next semester: one on Agatha Christie and two on authors of my own choosing. By then I had already understood I was dealing with a community that acted like a single brain, with different hands but one shared nervous

system.

"Why not?" I answered, and there was more calculation than enthusiasm in my acceptance.

I have no doubt Arkadina's hand was somewhere behind that request; her purposes remain unknown to me, but I imagine the goal is to overload me with work so that I either fail or my evaluations come out mediocre enough to justify my dismissal. What they don't realize is the breadth of my knowledge, that of a man who has spent twenty years reading a book and two plays a week.

The next day, when I arrived at the University, none of my teaching colleagues extended a hand to greet me. Magda leaned against the back wall, arms crossed, wearing that smile of hers that never reached her eyes.

"Why don't you live happily?" she pressed, and her blue eyes pulsed with an intensity that chilled my blood.

"Me?" I smiled, surprised by the question. "Of course I live happily."

"We pity you," she snapped, and there was no compassion or irony in her voice, only a cold, calculated hatred that reminded me of certain professors at the University of Philadelphia who never forgave a Latin American for holding, even for one semester, a teaching post they considered rightfully belonging to a compatriot.

I walked off, somewhat unsettled by her attitude, hands in my pockets, staring at the worn tile floor. Then I ran into a man of about forty, heavyset, bald, with white hair that contrasted with his thick, dark beard.

"Colombian?" he asked me, in a Spanish so crystal clear that for a moment I felt I was back in Bogotá.

I nodded, surprised, and he offered me his right hand with such a Caribbean gesture that I knew at once where he was from.

"Filipa told me about you," he said. "I'm José, Cuban-born; I married an Uzbek woman, and we already have two children."

I smiled with that spontaneity so dear to Latin Americans and gave him a firm handshake.

José is a fun man, one of those who have survived the diaspora through humor and cunning; like Mamita Carmen—my maternal grandmother, who used to cheer up the whole neighborhood in the Lagos district—he makes sharp remarks about every character he knows.

"That one over there," he told me, giving a discreet nod toward a heavyset man with a white beard walking down the hallway, a black beret pulled down to his eyebrows, "badmouths the gringos constantly, and that after they gave him a scholarship and he studied there for two years. His name is Ivan Popov."

"I've seen him in the Faculty of Architecture," I nodded. "I'd honestly like to meet him, but he never says hello."

"I can introduce you," José said, a mischievous glint in his offer. "But first, tell me: are you friends with the professor Magda?"

"Just colleagues," I answered. "I have to confess, she's not a pleasant woman."

José let out a laugh that echoed down the entire hallway.

"Pleasant! She's the most hated woman at the University, but also the most needed. She's in charge of the equipment: a digital Canon camera donated by the University of Iowa, and a professional lighting kit no one else knows how to operate. You can imagine the money Magda makes filming weddings and social events on weekends. At this University, my friend, the real salary isn't what they pay you to teach; it's what you make in your free time."

"And you?" I asked. "How does a Cuban survive in Bishkek?"

"By teaching Spanish, which is the only thing I know how to do," José answered with a broad smile. "My wife is Uzbek, like I said, and her parents run a carpet shop

at the bazaar. Between the university and the shop, we eat. It's not Havana, but it's not the exile others have had, either."

"And you don't think about going back?"

"To Cuba?" José laughed, but this time without joy. "I'd go back if they let me teach at the University of Havana. But I'm not part of the Castro family. Over there, those who left are worms, even if it was because there was nothing to eat. Here, at least, I'm an academic; there, I'd be a deserter."

He sighed and changed the subject with the skill of someone who has learned not to linger on what hurts.

"You need to be careful with those people," he said, gesturing toward the hallway where Magda had gone. "It's not that they're bad; it's that here the University is their only refuge. Take away a teaching post and you take away their bread. They can't forgive it because they can't afford to. And I'm telling you this because I heard you cost a professor her salary."

"Ivanoff isn't going to starve," I said, appealing to common sense. "She taught at the University for ten years; she has savings, she has a house, she has a daughter living in Germany who sends her money."

"That doesn't matter," José said, shaking his head. "What matters is that you're the foreigner who came to take what was mine. Reason doesn't matter in these cases; the story does. And the story's already been written: you're the villain."

Just then Gretchen came up to me with a book in hand and asked, in careful English, whether she could borrow my Russian exercise notebook. She wore a light sky-blue dress printed with flowers flying over Alpine peaks, cinched at the waist with a yellow silk ribbon, lime-green sandals, and a golden ribbon that set off her curly, abundant blonde hair.

"Natürlich! Wie soll ich nicht ein Buch zu einer

Valkyrie ausleihen?" I answered, and she gave a forced smile.

"Thanks," she said in English, reluctant to talk with me in German. "No one's ever called me that before, but you're a great reader, and that makes talking to you delightful, which is rare among so many professors boxed into their own fields of study."

"I see you found out what I discussed with Derogan," I replied in German. "Let's say I try to avoid falling into what Ortega y Gasset calls the barbarism of specialization."

"It would be far more charming if you presented those ideas as your own; after all, no one else has ever heard them, and if you say they're yours, people won't call you a presumptuous scholar, but a very insightful academic."

"I prefer to be honest," I replied.

"Even to the point of seeming naïve?" Gretchen studied me, weighing our chances of becoming lovers. "Besides, you must be far too honest with your wife."

"And she with me."

"One wouldn't expect any other comment from as faithful a husband as you claim to be. I hope neither of you ever disappoints the other."

"Why do you say that?"

"You're young and attractive."

"You're the attractive one, my dear Gretchen. If I weren't married..."

"I know."

Her lingering look did not go unnoticed. As we said goodbye, José winked at me.

"What looks!" he said, with a knowing smile. "I see you two already..."

"It's not what you think," I cut him off sharply.

But I could count, and it was obvious so many references to my personal life were no coincidence. At a small university, every gesture is watched, every word is

recorded, every lingering glance becomes a file.

José sighed and changed the subject again.

“Do you know Uriel?” he asked. “He’s Ecuadorian, also lives in Bishkek. A true indigenous man, as he calls himself; he has two polyglot children and is married to Heidi, an official at the German embassy. You should meet him; he’s one of the few Latin Americans in this city who doesn’t spend the whole day complaining about the cold.”

“I’d like that,” I said, and I meant it.

As José told me the story of how Uriel had met Heidi at a climate change conference in Bonn, I thought that maybe, after all, I wasn’t so alone in this city. But loneliness, I also thought, isn’t measured by the number of compatriots you have; it’s measured by how many people are willing to defend you when the world rises up against

11. A Couple with Cracks

If one person, or more than one, though fewer than the many, is stronger than the rest, sovereignty rightly belongs to them rather than to the multitude

Aristotle

Bishkek, September 7, 2002

Yesterday, around eight in the evening, a storm broke over the city. Anaïs and I went to bed early, but were woken by someone insistently pounding the doorbell with an urgency that promised nothing good. I opened the door, and Annula, without waiting to be invited in, pushed past me, wet umbrella first, left a trail of water on the mat, kicked off her sandals, and walked in her stockinged feet into the living-dining room.

“We don’t do that here,” I told her, showing her the loose nail heads sticking up from the wood floor. “Be careful not to hurt your feet.”

Annula looked at the nails and sat down on the sofa, right across from the statuette of Our Lady of Fátima, which holds the central spot in our apartment.

“To what do we owe your visit?”

Her eyes ran over the figure of the Virgin with an evaluative unhurriedness.

“I’ll tell them to bring you more rugs,” she said, reluctant to answer me, studying the nails.

“We prefer a waxed wooden floor,” I explained, impatient, “to those rugs donated during the siege of Leningrad.”

My expression must have irritated her, because, scrutinizing me, she let out one of her booming laughs. Her exaggeratedly cheerful laugh was that of someone who has decided the other person is a curious specimen, a worthy object for her mental notes.

"What's so funny?" I asked, with growing impatience.

"Are you religious?" Annula replied, her index finger pointing at the Virgin as though it were evidence in a trial.

"Yes," I answered, taking in her stunned expression. "Catholic."

"And do you respect the Pope?" she pressed, incredulous.

"That's a matter of casuistry," I said, in my own defense. "Do you respect other people?"

Anaïs served us tea in silence. Annula accepted the cup with both hands, as though its warmth might dissolve the discomfort she herself had brought.

"Let me put it another way," she pressed. "Do you love Jesus Christ?"

"Of course," I smiled. "Every believer loves his god. Even Satanists love the devil."

Annula narrowed her eyes, straining to grasp a remark that, given her assumptions, she hadn't expected. Her bare foot tapped the floor once, twice, like a metronome of impatience.

"But your god is dead," she insisted.

"You'd only need to read the Gospels to know that isn't so," I replied. "His defense of the persecuted, of the victims of injustice, of the weak in body, and of children, is enough to know he still lives among us."

"But in the end," Annula said, with that excitement typical of an academic who believes she's steering the conversation, "do you believe in God?"

"You're the one expressing a doubt, with that question," I answered.

"The Buddhists don't even consider the existence of God," she pronounced. "They're more atheist than people think; their perfection is nothingness."

"Yes," I clarified, "but not nothingness in itself—

rather, a consciousness of that nothingness. Isn't that what we are when we think? A nothingness with consciousness? German idealism, at least, reached the same conclusion by different paths: the ego must be destroyed in order to grasp the absolute."

Annula recoiled, disconcerted. Her foot stopped tapping the floor. She took a sip of tea, and her fingers trembled slightly as she set the cup back on the saucer. After years of debates, I recognize the gestures of defeat in an interlocutor; sometimes it's an ironic look; other times, an abrupt change of subject; sometimes the opponent offers you a drink, other times they excuse themselves to go to the bathroom. Annula, educated in the United States on a scholarship, had resorted to the Anglo-Saxon strategy of feigned incomprehension.

"A nothingness with consciousness?" she repeated. "I don't understand."

"Consciousness isn't material," I told her, sensing she was attributing my zeal for teaching to my religious beliefs. "No one knows how big a thought is, or how long it lasts, and yet, without consciousness, the universe simply wouldn't exist."

"But..."

"Have you ever experienced a stretch of time without consciousness?"

"I'm an atheist," she answered, "though I was raised Muslim; these days I sympathize with the creed of Israel."

I expressed my admiration with a look. Annula straightened up on the sofa, as though my approval had returned her to firmer ground.

"You already know," she went on, "Soros and all the other employers we have are Jewish."

"An admirable creed," I nodded. "My mother's surname is Ferreira, which means 'blacksmith,' and comes from the line of Jews who chose to convert to Catholicism and abandon their ancestral beliefs. I would have liked to

practice their rites, but I think what matters isn't the door through which one enters a library, but the interest we keep in reading and investigating what, according to Kant, lies beyond the limits of our understanding."

"Mysticism," she mused, and then, as though changing tack, "tell me, do you consider yourself more French, or more Colombian?"

"Honestly, I consider myself more human," I answered.

"I see," she sighed, thoughtfully. "In the Middle Ages, too, people considered themselves more a part of a universal Church than of a nation."

Then she said her goodbyes. At the door, she hesitated a moment, as though wanting to say something more, but only sighed, took her umbrella, put on her sandals, and left. I closed the door and stood there looking at the trail of water on the mat, then at the damp footprints of her sandals beside ours, then at the Virgin.

Annula had come to argue about God and to gauge my obedience. What I had taken for a pastoral visit was in fact an inspection; her initial laugh had not been at my gestures—a providential release valve—but at the little statue of Fátima; Annula had laughed upon confirming that we were, according to her informants, backward idol-worshippers. And what she had come looking for that night was to refute my faith, or, at the very least, to humiliate it. But, as had already happened with those who dared question my beliefs on the assumption that I was superstitious, it was she who ended up questioned. Annula left without getting what she'd come for: my submission, and her most stable metaphysical belief—that if we are, in the end, nothing, there is nothing to answer for in this life—had crumbled before the evidence of her own immortality.

I gathered she had wanted to tell me something delicate but hadn't dared, fearing that my perceptiveness

would have already worked out what I in fact already suspected: that Annula had met with Arkadina, who had told her there could be only one reason a professor invited—not to teach courses, not to attend Communications Department meetings, measures meant to calm the growing local resentment toward the American invasion—would insist on working anyway. Intrigued, Annula must have been told, according to her informants, that it was my religious fanaticism driving me to defy my superiors' wishes. Annula must have laughed heartily, saying that if that was the problem, one conversation would not only refute my god but also set me on the straight path, the path of the world, of Realpolitik. She hadn't counted on the fact that I had already devoted my entire life not only to seeking God, but to putting his precepts into practice.

This morning, taking down the trash bags, as is my habit, I saw a Kyrgyz man of about thirty watching me silently, some ten meters away. He wore rags elegantly arranged over his body, nomad-style; behind him, a woman with three children of various ages sat on some stones, in the shade of the rugs the neighbors hang out to air in the sun. The woman lowered her face, while the three children watched me with eyes that held back the urge to beg.

I wanted to walk over and hand them the bags directly, but I immediately caught the cynicism of my own intention: give them my trash as a gift? Leftover food and wrappers? A small extra effort wouldn't have crumbled their solemn dignity. I gave the father a faint smile, which he returned with a broad one—a smile that didn't hide the hunger but rather made it more visible—and I left the bags on a clear patch of ground, away from the foul-smelling center of the dump. I turned and headed for the grocery kiosk, but before I got there I heard the sound: plastic tearing, whispered voices, children struggling with each other. I didn't look back, but I had to hold back tears until I made it through the kiosk door.

I bought the naan and milk for breakfast, and, back home, I stood on the terrace watching the dump for several minutes, unable to move.

"What happened?" Anaïs asked, alarmed.

"There's so much injustice in this world," I said.

I explained what had happened. Anaïs didn't answer right away; she sat beside me and rested her head on my shoulder. Bishkek's misery had entered the apartment uninvited, and only our faith in God, who cares for every one of his creatures, could console her.

Bishkek, September 8, 2002

Last night we attended, at the Hyatt Hotel, a concert by the Bishkek Philharmonic Orchestra: Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 20, Beethoven's String Quartet No. 14, and Rimsky-Korsakov's Trombone Concerto.

At the entrance we ran into Darixa, Parvaneh, and Gretchen.

"Isn't Petra coming?" Anaïs asked Darixa.

"She told me she wasn't feeling well."

By then I had already concluded that Petra belonged to that growing minority of educated philistines: young doctorate holders who prefer television and pop singers to the most refined works of universal art.

"And Venkatesh?" I asked.

"He's not answering his phone."

Going in, I spotted Damira among the violinists. I crossed the hall and greeted her personally. Back at my seat, third row, I watched Dorothy come in, violin in hand, wearing a gold dress with a neckline that showed off her breasts provocatively. Feminist theory and a plunging gold neckline coexisted in her without any visible conflict, I thought, as the audience burst into applause. There she was: the woman who spoke of sisterhood and deconstruction, with the same mouth that demanded center stage, with the same body she'd been using as a

calling card for years. I wondered whether her position as principal violin owed itself to talent, or to her skill at flattering—and being admired by—the conductor, a middle-aged Kyrgyz woman who looked at her as though Dorothy were the daughter she never had.

Of course, no one would say it out loud; at the university, privileges disguise themselves as merit, and networks of power as affection.

"She's the principal violinist," I told Anaïs, who nudged me with a knowing look.

A face across the room kept watching us insistently: it was Sultan, the vice-rectory official.

Darixa greeted him with a slight bow.

"It's nice to know this city's police enjoy classical music," I said.

"He's protecting us," Darixa replied, with that self-assurance that gave her an air of arrogance. "His wife is a cousin of mine, and she never stops insisting he keep an eye on us, against terrorists."

In Bishkek, protection and surveillance seemed to be sibling verbs. Sultan studied the exits as closely as he studied the academics, noting who arrived with whom, who applauded whom. His presence appeared to be a shield against the outside world, but also, at the same time, an eye trained on the inside.

The conductor stepped onto the podium and, after a series of peculiar gestures that conveyed more inspiration than technique, began the concert. Having already attended concerts by the best orchestras of Philadelphia, New York, Cleveland, Manchester, and London, the local effort left something to be desired: mismatched notes here and there, unexpected tempo shifts. Dorothy was especially rushed; her bow flew over the strings as though eager to be done. She paid scant attention to the conductor, and at times seemed to be running her own parallel orchestra. I wondered again, indignant this time, whether her position was a form of flattery, in the simple hope that

her connections might one day help that orchestra of volunteer musicians. After all, none of the members received any government stipend; their work was purely for the love of art. Or, as they already said in Bishkek by way of excuse: a hobby.

It was Sunday, and at noon we went with Whitney and Gretchen to Mass at the only Catholic church in the region. Hans, our priest, was a German Jesuit in his forties. He was assisted by Edna and Rosemary, two nuns of around thirty, wearing grey sweaters over their white habits.

"I'm one of the Germans Stalin displaced after conquering Germany," Hans told me. "They've expelled us from this country several times already, but here we remain, fighting on."

Mass was in Russian, though there was a reading in English. My attention was caught by an American man in his sixties, holding hands with a redheaded teenager.

"I'm Joe," he told me, "retired and happy living in this country."

"I don't doubt it," I answered, taking in his companion: thin, in a miniskirt, about fifteen, with reddish hair falling to her knees.

Then a Western prejudice took hold of me: the one that looks with suspicion or contempt at older men who love a much younger woman. I let that simplistic, black-and-white way of judging incubate a silent indignation in me toward that man, even though I knew nothing of his history, nor of either of their reasons, nor the real nature of that relationship.

I had fallen into the temptation of unjustified contempt. I never spoke ill of him, much less schemed against him, but the feeling was there, growing in secret, fed by a moral pride disguised as righteousness.

Only later would I come to understand the seriousness of that. I had fallen into exactly the same logic

of discrimination I had so often condemned in others. I myself had felt the rejection of those who looked down on me for being Colombian, foreign, a man from the so-called "third world" in the former Soviet Union, or for being married to a beautiful Frenchwoman despite my slightly darker skin. I was reproducing the very mechanism of those who scorn homosexuals, migrants, or anyone whose life doesn't fit society's conventional coordinates.

In this case, my prejudice landed on an older man with a young, beautiful wife; in me there was a mix of moralism and envy, because I myself, in the excesses and fantasies of my youth, would have wished to possess that young woman, whom I judged more deserving of a passionate man like myself, without even considering that I was married to a woman I truly loved.

Months later—as I will recount—the Lord made me understand my fault, and my repentance was great. I felt a sorrow much like David's, when the Lord rebuked him for having schemed slyly against an innocent man, believing himself righteous while evil took root in his own heart.

"This is my wife," he said, preempting my judgment. "Marlene; Marco."

"Pleased to meet you," Marlene said, with an expression of innocence that moved me and chilled me at once.

I smiled, wished them a good Mass, and walked away. Watching them make their way toward the altar—him in his beige linen suit, her with her childlike legs barely covered—I thought of Misha, of the Russian soldiers who used her at the base, of Tom Robinson and his grateful students, of Weiler and his university harem.

The Catholic church, that refuge of consciences, seemed to have taken them in; Hans greeted them with the same smile he gave the elderly Kyrgyz women. Everyone pretended to overlook their age difference, but I told myself then that the greatest reason a woman has loved a

man since the Stone Age was never his looks, nor his strength, nor even his intelligence, but his capacity to provide for her needs and those of her children.

Toward evening, drunk on spirituality—or perhaps on the contradiction between Mass and reality—we visited, with Venkatesh and Petra, the Orthodox church of Bishkek, with its beautiful images of Our Lady and the Christ Child. Just as I had sensed from the icons I'd seen in so many books, the veneration of the Virgin here is as strong, if not stronger, than in Catholic nations.

We had dinner at a restaurant, where I told them about the games Arkadina played, always assigning me the role of victim.

"I can't believe it!" Whitney exclaimed. "Why are they attacking you?"

"It seems my arrival made a professor redundant," I answered. "And, besides, they haven't hidden their displeasure at being taught by a Colombian."

"There's more to it than that," Venkatesh cut in, lowering his voice. He glanced both ways across the table, though the restaurant was nearly empty. "That department has always been troubled."

"Tell us," Anaïs said, leaning toward him.

Venkatesh sighed, took a sip of wine, and began speaking in a tone that was neither gossip nor warning, but both at once.

"Last semester there was a conflict that nearly became a national scandal. But... I'd rather not go into it."

"Please!" I exclaimed.

"Arkadina is very well positioned at the University," Venkatesh replied, now clearly uncomfortable. "One of her sisters holds an influential post in the government's intelligence department."

"The KGB," I sighed.

"They're very traditionalist," Venkatesh smiled, but it was a tense smile. "I'll just say that Valentino, an

American professor, was seduced by a student, and it was Arkadina's relatives who took the photos handed over to SEP."

Whitney set down her fork.

"Seduced, or was it the other way around?" she asked, with a hint of skepticism.

Venkatesh raised a hand to calm her.

"I don't know the details."

"An affair happens with the complicity of both parties," Parvaneh remarked.

"What I do know," Venkatesh went on, "is that Rachel made the mistake of siding with Arkadina's family out of diplomacy, which led to her confrontation with Tom Robinson, who, as you all know, was a human rights leader back in the sixties. Tom then wrote a twenty-page letter to Budapest denouncing Rachel and Jeff's biases. The two of them traveled to Budapest, where they had to give in to Tom's pressure. Rachel resigned, and, in exchange, Jeff kept his job."

"And Valentino?" Anaïs asked, her voice quieter than usual.

"SEP terminated his contract," Venkatesh said. "They sent him back to the United States with a decent severance and a nondisclosure agreement that keeps him from talking about the matter."

Petra, who had been silent, looked at me directly.

"You need to be careful with those characters," she warned me.

"You can rest assured I won't lend myself to any scandals," I replied.

Petra smiled in a way I didn't like at all.

"One of Arkadina's sisters," she went on, "happens to be none other than Arthur Holmes's wife."

The name landed on the table like a stone. Anaïs looked at me, eyes wide.

"The academic who hired you in Liverpool?" she asked, not hiding her shock.

I nodded, impatiently, feeling the pieces starting to fall into place in an order that did not favor me.

"He has two children with her," Venkatesh said. "He visits Bishkek twice a year. No one talks about it, of course. Holmes is a star in his field; Arkadina is just a provincial dean. But the kinship exists, and so does the network."

"So the careful Morozov family," I murmured, "is connected to the best of American and Russian intelligence."

No one confirmed or denied my remark. The waiter brought the food, and for a few seconds the sound of the plates filled the void that piece of information had created.

"Do you know Suhrab?" Whitney asked me, changing the subject with an abruptness that betrayed her discomfort. "The young man with a Japanese look who studied in Indiana and translates the local papers into English."

"Ah!" I smiled, grateful for the reprieve. "Of course; quite the citizen of the world."

"I find him rather articulate," Whitney said, with a worried look. "Yesterday we were debating the topic of marriage at an Anthropology Department meeting. What's your impression of him?"

"He can express himself," I said, hedging, "but he's not an intellectual."

Whitney nodded slowly, not in agreement but in confirmation.

"I've been looking into his *modus vivendi*," she told me, with a growing conspiratorial air that started to make me uncomfortable. "Did you know he has a list of foreign subscribers he charges twenty dollars a month to send translated news from the local papers?"

"He showed them to me himself," I nodded. "I have to say, they're admirably translated."

"He's a slave driver!" Whitney exclaimed, with a sudden fury. "I found out he has Travis Albright do the translating for him, a man from Kentucky who teaches in Osh, barely five kilometers from Uzbekistan. According to Travis, he pays him a pittance, but Travis takes it because, he says, there are no other decent jobs he can get in that country. I spoke to him on the phone last night, told him about you, and said I'd talk to Annula about the two of you meeting in Osh."

"That's very kind of you, Whitney."

"It's nothing," Whitney took my hand with an enthusiasm that suddenly struck me as excessive. "Tomorrow I'm going straight to SEP to demand they treat him the way every international faculty member should be treated."

"Have you read Popper?" Petra asked me, with an inquisitorial air.

"Some," I nodded. "His feud with Wittgenstein is memorable."

"We're studying him in class," she said, not registering my comment. "He denounces the absolutism of Plato and Marx. And, honestly, as I told my students, I wouldn't want a system like that to happen again."

I smiled to myself. A whole PhD in political science, discovering only a year after graduating that communism was an infamous bureaucratic system of opportunists, liars, and murderers?

"But this country's President deeply admires Marx and Engels," Venkatesh said.

"I can't believe that," Anaïs said.

"At least that's what he said in this year's opening speech at the University," Petra replied, in the tone of a doctor addressing a housewife. "Kyrgyz students and professors have the advantage that, being well versed in dialectical materialism, they're now learning the Western theories of a renewed left."

"Nonsense," I cut in. "Marx was an ambitious

sociologist who used mathematical formulas to prove that whoever invests the most money in any enterprise is a thief. Lenin emulated both his sophistry and his cunning, and Machiavellian-ly fulfilled Marx's dream of becoming the ideologue and chief of world socialism. That he found an even bigger scoundrel in Stalin was his own tragedy, and that of his wretched wife, and that of the no less dangerous idealist, Trotsky."

Venkatesh applauded slowly, with a mocking smile.

"Admirable summary of Soviet history," he said. "I don't agree, but I'm impressed by your gift for synthesis."

"Who do you admire?" Petra asked me, her face pale. "I mean, which figure in twentieth-century world politics?"

"I don't know," I murmured, "perhaps Gandhi."

"I admire Hillary Clinton," Petra said, defiantly. "She's a woman of great capacity to govern the United States."

"Few would doubt it," Whitney cut in.

"It's a shame I never met her while I was studying in Boston."

"I saw her once," I said, without thinking, remembering the passage of a certain celebrity through the pedestrian streets of Temple University.

The silence was immediate. Whitney stopped eating. Petra's eyes widened as though she'd seen a ghost. Anaïs, beside me, straightened in her chair as though an electric current had run down her spine.

"Is that true?" Whitney asked Anaïs, with apparent astonishment, but there was something in her voice I didn't like: the satisfaction of someone who has just found a crack.

For a brief moment I wondered what sort of conversations my wife had been having with the woman who was now, in front of everyone, her confidante. Whitney's reaction was that of someone who believed she

held all the information about my past. Anaïs crossed her arms, indignant.

"Really?" Petra looked at me with an almost childlike excitement.

"That's a lie!" Anaïs exclaimed, with unusual fury, slapping the table with her palm. The blow made the glasses ring.

There was no possible way I had lied. I had seen her in Philadelphia, at a campaign event, some twenty meters away. Or was it another woman in American politics? Condoleezza Rice? To me, steeped as I was in readings of history and poetry, celebrities were all much alike. But my wife's fury kept me from saying another word. Her face was flushed, her eyes glassy. What had, until then, been a pleasant academic discussion turned, thanks to her reaction, into a marital accusation of unfaithfulness to the truth, proclaiming to the crowd:

Look! If this man is capable of lying about something as trivial as seeing a famous woman at a rally or a conference, isn't it obvious he'll deceive me with other women too?

Her discomfort had already been building: perhaps the way Whitney was looking at her, perhaps the remark about Hillary I had tossed off too lightly in front of Petra, perhaps the suspicion that I was showing off to impress our colleagues. Or perhaps simply the exhaustion of feeling invisible in a conversation that revolved entirely around my words.

"You are such a liar!" she exclaimed, and this time her English was a whip.

Venkatesh, Petra, and Whitney all stared at us, eyes wide open. I wanted to keep telling the story, to prove I was telling the truth, but past experience had conditioned me to fear an enraged woman. I asked for the check, we paid, and we went home without saying another word about what had happened.

Now I know that, had I kept arguing with Anaïs, we would have hurt each other irreparably. As on other

occasions, I forgave her and chose to forget what had happened. But I don't want to imagine the whispers among our colleagues over our quarrel. Whitney is surely already telling Rachel and Annula about it, over some coffee at the Hyatt Hotel.

12. A Family with Russian-American Influence

Bishkek, September 10, 2002

Darixa emailed me the program for "International Politics in Central Asia," the conference set to take place in Samarkand in two weeks, on whose committee Jeff had placed me. The event is sponsored by the U.S. State Department, and they expect me to approve the program. In fact, I plan to propose a new panel; since Darixa is inviting us to suggest corrections, I wrote to her saying we should include a discussion on International Communication.

The American faculty and administrators at the University are all middle-aged men: Daniel, the President; Edward, a wealthy banker who'd had liposuction but forgot to have the fat removed from his neck—every bit the fin-de-siècle English bourgeois, flat stomach and double chin both; and Tom, a sixtysomething bourgeois revolutionary, to the extent the United States allows one to be. He proudly told me he'd marched for African-American rights in the sixties, and that he had a son from those sympathies, with an African-American woman he had since divorced.

"¡No pasarán!" was also his soldierly greeting when he learned I was Colombian.

He then moved on to Marx and surplus value. I soon understood his pro-communist comments were a façade masking his academic idleness. He is, besides, an alcoholic; I confirmed as much yesterday, alongside Anaïs and Parvaneh, at a bar on Chuy Prospect. His eyes clouded over as he drank what looked like his tenth beer—judging by the empty bottles on his table—and I watched on his face the look of defeat worn by those who take refuge in oblivion. Minutes later we saw a woman of medium height,

dark hair, and light eyes walk in: Anisa, Tom's fiancée, barely twenty-two, dressed in designer clothes.

"This is my future wife!" Tom exclaimed, hugging her and kissing her neck.

Though Kyrgyz, Anisa works hard to remain expressionless, which certainly gives her a European air of superiority.

"Anisa is off to England next week," Tom said. "She'll be doing a doctorate in political science at the University of London."

"Tom got me the scholarship," Anisa said, her eyes wide with satisfaction.

"I only wrote a recommendation letter!" Tom protested, with false modesty, delighted to show off the reach of his pen.

I sensed that, once graduated, Anisa would leave him; it was the same story as Pirandello's *Lumie di Sicilia*: a man sends his beloved abroad to study; the beloved succeeds and shamelessly dumps her lover and benefactor. I thought Tom's motives were murky: how could he send such a beautiful fiancée off to study politics, alone, in London? Didn't he know female independence was all the rage now? Tom was either a Sancho Panza or a Mephistopheles. But then I remembered Misha, and the piece fell into place differently: Tom was neither a naïve lover nor a demon; he was an older man with money and connections, and Anisa was a young local woman who had traded her youth for a way out. The real tragedy, to my mind, was not Tom's future abandonment of her, but that Anisa, to secure her studies, had handed over the flower of her twenty years to a sixty-something man who reeked of beer and defeat. And Tom, for his part, was simply repeating a pattern he knew well: using his capital and power to enjoy his life however he pleased. He wasn't the first man to do so, and he wouldn't be the last.

"Do you have children?" Anaïs asked Tom at one

point.

"Stewart!" he exclaimed. "I don't understand why young people are so difficult these days. He looks African-American and..."

"You can't forgive him for that?" I asked, knowing I was stepping into muddy waters.

"Huh?" Tom's eyes widened in surprise. I had touched the most sensitive nerve, with a bluntness no Kyrgyz would ever have dared.

"When I studied at Temple," I went on, "I had a Canadian classmate who made a documentary about mixed-race children—that is, the children of Europeans and other diasporas. In her case, her mother was Canadian, her father Indian. I remember an interview she did with a woman from Montreal, daughter of a Korean mother and a French father: Asian-looking, the poor woman cried in rage, cursing providence for not having inherited her father's European features."

"I was one of those who threw stones in Washington," Tom replied, dodging the subject, "and I'm not ashamed to say I ended up in jail."

"But the climate has changed," Anisa cut in. "After September eleventh, no one accepts your stories as heroic anymore, Tom."

"Now they want to blame the Muslims!" Tom shot back. "How is it possible we're governed by greedy men like Bush and Rumsfeld? Now they want to invade Iraq! But tell me, weren't we the ones who gave Saddam Hussein his power in the first place?"

"The same thing happened with Iran," Parvaneh cut in, with that arrogant laugh that had already become her trademark, "when the United States and the British overthrew the only democratic government we ever had."

"I remember that well," Tom said. "Operation Ajax. And all because the elected minister... what was his name? We ended up replacing him with the ayatollahs."

"Not exactly," Parvaneh corrected, crossing her

arms. "That would be far too elegant a story for them; they didn't create the ayatollahs; they created the vacuum the ayatollahs later filled."

Tom tilted his head.

"Something like that, yes."

"In 1953, Washington and London destroyed the only secular leader Iran ever had with real popular legitimacy: Mohammad Mosaddegh. His crime was wanting Iranian oil to belong to Iran, not to the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company."

"And then they reinstalled the Shah," Tom said.

"No. They turned him into something worse," Parvaneh replied. "They gave him weapons, money, international legitimacy, and a secret police trained by the CIA and the Mossad: the SAVAK."

Anisa said nothing.

Parvaneh took a sip of tea before going on.

"They tortured liberals, socialists, journalists, university professors. They shut down every moderate opposition. When you crush every rational alternative, the only thing left standing is whatever can hide in the mosques."

"Ruhollah Khomeini," Tom murmured.

"Exactly. While Washington was celebrating the Shah as a symbol of modernity, underneath, a monstrous resentment was growing. When the regime fell in 1979, there were no organized liberals left. The clerics were the only ones with a nationwide structure."

"And Paris?" I asked.

Parvaneh smiled.

"The great historical irony. Ruhollah Khomeini spent his final exile in Paris, giving interviews to Western media that presented him almost as an austere mystic who would bring democracy. Many people didn't understand what he was really saying... or didn't want to."

Tom let out a bitter laugh.

"First they destroy a democracy over oil. Then they prop up a dictatorship out of fear of communism. Then they act surprised when an anti-Western theocracy is born."

"And now they say the Third World War will start in Iran," I added.

"Who's said that?" Tom smiled, eagerly.

"I'm saying it," I answered, "based on recent historical events. What does a lion do when it discovers someone wants to cage it?"

"You're saying it," Anisa repeated. "And who else?"

"Nostradamus," I answered, recalling some interpretation of his quatrains.

Faced with Tom and Parvaneh's skeptical silence, I added:

"There are quatrains that have been read as referring to Ayatollah Khomeini's education in Paris. Why else would Nostradamus have bothered tracing the origins of an autocratic system, if not for its sinister role in history?"

"And that role is Armageddon?" Parvaneh asked, mockingly. Her expression revealed I'd touched one of her most intimate nerves.

"Who would have thought?" I nodded. "It's what I've always sensed."

"We're in the presence of a prophet!" Parvaneh laughed—I couldn't tell whether mocking me, or celebrating my wit.

We talked about other premonitions, which set us apart from the rest of the group and let Tom and Anais strike up their own conversation. I, meanwhile, turned to Parvaneh.

"I emigrated from Iran as a teenager," she told me, discreetly, "to become the wife of an Englishman. A womanizing bastard! I gave him a son, and he left me for another woman. I got a doctorate in anthropology, and

here I am now, as you can see: no experience, working in a poor, politically unstable country.”

“It’s not a bad post,” I replied.

“Let’s be honest!” she exclaimed, indignant. “This is a country of criminals and lunatics: some came to be punished, others for psychiatric treatment. I only trust the almond-eyed locals, though some of them think themselves superior for their command of Russian. We’re all failures here! Do you think I’d have taken this post if they’d offered me one at the University of Nottingham instead? We have here an excellent showcase of failed academics.”

“I traveled to get to know another nation,” I replied, thinking of the post I’d been offered at Northern University, until I made the mistake of mentioning it to one of my professors at Temple University, who told his colleague Adolf, my American nemesis, who wasted no time calling Chicago to talk them out of hiring me.

“And you,” Parvaneh added, “tell me, how long were you unemployed?”

I looked at her, irritated.

“Anaïs also believes,” Tom interjected, providentially, “that American interventions in the political course of the Middle East have proven counterproductive.”

“And what are the United States’ interests in this region?” I asked, expecting to hear a speech about that constant fear of some formidable enemy rising against the American people from the most remote corner of the planet.

“Oil,” Tom answered, mechanically, “natural resources, world dominance—in short, everything an empire wants.”

“That’s the paradox,” I said. “That the very word ‘empire’ now sounds inappropriate to us is a great step toward emancipation.”

Tom was surprised to learn I had started a doctorate in philosophy at the Universidad Javeriana, which I interrupted to begin film studies in the United States.

“So you’re another Rimbaud?”

“Marco is also a poet,” Anaïs nodded, “but not so young.”

“I read him as another one of those geniuses who throw overboard everything they’ve already achieved—exactly what could have secured them a calm, happy bourgeois life—in order to venture into other worlds...”

“Other problems,” Petra cut in, “other experiences, other renewed sufferings. What an interesting theory—the same is said of Oscar Wilde...”

When Tom reminded us he taught in the Political Studies master’s program, I mentioned I had just reread *Il Principe*.

“Machiavelli was a writer who lived from court to court, backing this tyrant or that one,” he said, dismissively.

“I think chapter seventeen sheds light on the swing our democracies suffer between right and left,” I remarked.

“Machiavelli talked about right and left?” he asked, with unexpected naïveté.

“About the pros and cons of holding on to what you have versus being generous with the people,” I corrected him, “which amounts to the same thing.”

“I prefer to study Marx,” he snapped, and, turning his smiling face to Anisa, added, “Do you know I just read that new Marx biography by Francis Wheen? My students are going to love a book that tells the story of his travels, his struggles, his triumphs. It’s very entertaining! Real philosophy doesn’t have to be a brick!”

“I read it before leaving England,” I cut in, “and I have to confess it left me with the clear impression that Karl Marx was an ambitious hypocrite.”

“What?” Tom exclaimed, his eyes suddenly nervous.

"In its final pages, Wheen describes how Marx traveled, subsidized by his bourgeois friend Engels, on vacation to North Africa, where he shaved off what he himself called his 'prophet's beard.' From then on he avoided being photographed, since, right up to his death, he believed—based on his reading of the runes, a ritual he practiced almost daily—that he was to be the messiah of socialism, and he didn't want an image of an ordinary man to survive for his final years, or, as he believed as he lay dying, for posterity."

"What you're saying is impossible," Tom stammered. "I read that book myself, and I don't remember any of that."

"What Marco says is correct," Anisa cut in, with a hint of reproach.

From his expression I knew Tom would go home and check the book; it was obvious he hadn't read it with the Vedic patience that, in some Eastern languages, uses a single verb for both reading and studying. The Anglo-Saxon proverb "time is money," which never really took root in other cultures, keeps Americans teetering on the edge of schizophrenia; spending more than three hours on a book is simply an impracticable undertaking, which is why they've designed speed-reading courses that graduate deceptive scholars: perusers.

Bishkek, September 11, 2002

Around noon we were called out of class for a minute of silence for the victims of September eleventh. I went down the narrow stairs, packed with students, out to the square in front of Dubovy Park. The first chords of the American national anthem sounded, and we saw Whitney, who, noticing the absence of the Europeans—Venkatesh, Parvaneh, Petra, Gretchen—came up to us, her face trembling. I wondered whether the others' apparent indifference had been deliberate.

"It can never happen again!" she told me, holding back tears. "I was in Pittsburgh, and one of my friends lost a brother in the Twin Towers. Did you know they did a survey and found that 90% of Americans had lost someone they knew, or a relative, in their family circle? I..."

I hugged her tenderly, and she burst into tears against my chest, her bristly hair pressing into my face. It was then I noticed that, despite her pale skin and green eyes, Whitney was of African descent, as the poet Nicanor Parra sings of one of his beautiful, curly-haired blonde loves in pre-revolutionary Havana.

One of the Black women raped by their masters, I thought to myself, remembering a passage from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. I thought of Chuck and Julia, and of their anguished messages during those trying hours.

"I'm from South Carolina," she told us on the way home, walking back along Chuy Avenue, and, gesturing at her raccoon-like eyes, added, "That's why I look like a buccaneer."

"I spent two summer vacations at Cape Hatteras," I nodded. "A place of blue water and open beaches, with hundreds of shipwrecks to its name."

"It's not called the Graveyard of the Atlantic for nothing," Whitney answered, with a touch of pride, and, suddenly noticing Anaïs's legs, asked, "Would you like to go swimming with me? I was told the Soviet-era pool is still open."

Anaïs smiled, pleased.

"Can Marco come?"

"Marco?" Whitney repeated, embarrassed. "Of course! Why not?"

Once at her apartment, I mentioned my sister was a U.S. citizen.

"Did she marry an American citizen?" she asked, pouring me a glass of port.

"How did you know?" I exclaimed, with a hint of irony.

"Statistics."

"With a Colombian-American," I clarified, and, to sweeten her prejudices, added, "he works at a drive-through; he and my sister are part of the millions of Americans whose taxes fund these academic endeavors. They work all day and watch television at night. Entertainment is the worker's opium."

"You studied film," she replied, "which is entertainment itself."

"I'm trying to reform it," I nodded.

"The Slavs here love their television too!" Whitney countered. "Isn't that right, my dear Anaïs?"

I realized not only that my remark had offended her, but also that Whitney was a poorly prepared academic. By passing her doubt on to a third colleague, she reduced truth to consensus. Now I understood why she found Suhrab intimidating: her Southern accent was, Whitney knew, her greatest asset, and even in that, Suhrab, with his New York accent, outdid her.

Anaïs smiled without opening her mouth and spread her arms in a gesture of cheerful complicity.

"I don't know!" she said.

"Do you really think film is the worker's opium?"

"If Marco says so, it must be true," Anaïs answered, still smiling. "He's read more books than you could imagine."

For the rest of the evening, Whitney avoided speaking to me. I fear my remark about her state's coastline hadn't gone over well either. As a Southern anthropologist, she resents that an ethnographic curiosity—a Colombian in Kyrgyzstan—should have explored her own history and landscape.

Bishkek, September 12, 2002

The war I sensed coming has begun. And I've been attacked on the flank I thought best defended: SEP. Since Darixa wasn't answering my message, I sent her another

email, to which she replied crudely, copying the rest of the committee: Jeff, Rachel, Annula, and Narguiza.

"I haven't ignored your messages, Marco," she wrote, "but I believe the panel you're suggesting was already organized at last year's conference. We shouldn't exclude the locals who are organizing their own conferences. It's clear you're suggesting these changes because you want to travel to Mongolia. No doubt you've already learned that your presence in Mongolia, as a member of the organizing committee, isn't necessary. Your role as supervisor in Bishkek is, in fact, purely protocol. If there's been a communication issue, I assure you it won't happen again."

It doesn't irritate me that Darixa treats me the way a Soviet administrator treats her subordinates, wielding a crude language that reveals her professional limitations. What I suffer through, in fact, with more academic or literary interest than anything else, is the *modus operandi* of a society that crushes anyone who dares suggest a change. I gathered my message had wounded Darixa's pride; she failed to understand that my invitation to correct her program was, in fact, a courtesy.

Had I made a mistake? I don't think so, as I made clear to her at once:

"How is it possible that what you yourself admit was an organizational error has now become a deliberate act of exclusion on my part? If your intention is to reduce me to passivity, I would rather send an email to the rest of the group announcing and justifying my withdrawal from the committee. Likewise, I would like to know: how is it possible that the subject of communication is excluded from a conference on international politics? Communication is the boundary and the extension of politics, sociology, religion, ideology, and so on. Communication is, to borrow Schopenhauer's words, the representation of the world. Can we understand a society without studying its communicative processes? Can

ideology be understood without accounting for popular speech? Or for expressions such as ‘I believe the panel you’re suggesting was already organized at last year’s conference’? I cannot think of any area of contemporary theory that excludes communication—from Gramsci’s studies on civil rights in society and film, to Baudrillard’s sociology and Joseph Campbell’s studies on myth, not to mention Aristotle. I wonder whether you have rejected any other similarly related topic; indeed, whether anyone besides myself has ever proposed a comparable one. I am also left with the impression that, by excluding this subject, a particular form of censorship is being imposed, extending not only to academics but, above all, to journalism students. In our first meeting I had the impression that you and Jeff were the moderators of this group. Should I now address you as the sole organizer of this event? If so, what is my role on this committee? Am I meant to sign a form simply to lend a democratic appearance to autocratic decisions? If you are so certain communication belongs to a different conference, why did you include me on this committee in the first place?”

After sending the email, Anaïs remarked that Arkadina might be behind this exclusion.

“Bishkek is a small city,” she told me, “and if it’s true she’s so well connected, it wouldn’t be surprising if Darixa’s decision were based on Arkadina’s prejudices.”

“It’s plausible,” I nodded, “but unlikely.”

“You already defeated her at the University, in front of her colleagues and students.”

“Those dark circles under her eyes might be from envy,” I nodded, “just as Dante describes in his Comedy. Could she be one of those Asian women who delight in watching their enemies suffer?”

Passing by the Abdylas Maldybaev National Opera and Ballet Theater of Kyrgyzstan, I noticed they were advertising the premiere of *Madame Butterfly*. I tried to buy

two tickets, but they were already sold out. Some hesitation on the cashier’s part told me there were tickets set aside for what Anglo-Saxons call “very important people” (V.I.P.). Back home, I called Narguiza, who promised she’d help us.

“I’d also like to see a classic play,” I added, “and if it’s Chekhov, all the better.”

Bishkek, September 14, 2002

Yesterday afternoon, Petra visited us and asked whether we’d be traveling to Ulaanbaatar or Samarkand. When we told her we hadn’t been included in any conference, she didn’t believe us.

“Then why did they even bring you here?” she remarked, irritated.

“Since you ask,” I answered, “I want to tell you that, following Jeff’s invitation on the bus, I submitted a conference proposal on International Communication. As you may know, Darixa sent an email saying she’d only received four proposals: Whitney’s—who’ll be going to Mongolia—yours, Venkatesh’s, and Parvaneh’s. I immediately called Darixa to ask why mine hadn’t been included, and she told me she didn’t consider it relevant. I sent a complaint to Annula, who told me my proposal was too broad and couldn’t be compared to the topics they’d chosen: Dimensions of Civil Society (Venkatesh), Creating a New World: Legacies and Perspectives (Petra), Globalization versus Localization (Whitney), and Leaving Home (Parvaneh). I told her my topic was just as interesting, and she asked whether I was willing to present it before the cream of Kyrgyz academia—that is, before the students and faculty of the Political Science department—and I told her, of course. Annula made a call and scheduled me to give the lecture on Thursday. Even after that error of Darixa’s was cleared up, my immediate supervisor sent me an email I’d like you to read.”

I showed her Annula’s email.

“Dear Marco:

You may have forgotten our discussion during orientation about the subject of the conference. First, the topic should be broad, and, second, it shouldn’t be oriented toward only one or two disciplines.

Having chaired many committees, both as a member of SEP and as deputy country director of the Soros Foundation’s flagship program, Darixa is fully qualified and has ample experience to narrow down a dozen submissions to a few comprehensive topics that make the voting process efficient and thoughtful—that is, a thought-provoking event. If fellows forced her to forward every single topic sent by email, we would end up with long, drawn-out discussions that go nowhere. This has happened before. So, in the interest of efficiency, brevity, and time, we have chosen to select the broadest topics and put them up for a vote.

I fully agree with your view that ‘International Communication’ sounds broad, but it shouldn’t be counted among the broadest topics submitted to us. Furthermore, we at SEP do not make decisions based on personalities or on who submitted the proposals. We make impartial decisions grounded in years of collective experience in these matters.

Allow me to repeat that Darixa has been trained to identify the topics that attract the interest of students across different disciplines. You may not be aware of it, but Darixa has been an exceptional local staff member and continues to provide excellent service to SEP. Before questioning someone’s credentials, please take the time to learn more about them and get to know them properly.

I hope this email has clarified what we mean by a conference topic.

Best wishes,
Annula Pravitt.”

“By ‘get to know them properly,’” Petra scoffed, “she means that Darixa is, according to Venkatesh, the mistress of one of SEP’s higher-ups.”

I shrugged in that French way.

“Something like that, I assumed,” I answered. “I stoically refrained from replying to her message, and, in response, Darixa sent another email explaining that, out of ten topics, they’d be choosing nine, and kindly included my proposal—which, as you can already guess, was the only one excluded from the foreign conference program.”

“She has it out for you!” she exclaimed, before saying goodbye.

“What’s most serious,” I nodded, “is that Annula reproduces the very same vertical Soviet structure she’s supposed to be correcting; instead of engaging my argument, she resorts to the appeal-to-authority fallacy, pointing out that Darixa has been a great secretary of the Politburo that SEP has become, that supposed miniature of the United States.”

“And it’s paid for, mind you,” Dorothy said, with marked indignation, “with taxpayer money.”

All the other international professors will leave this weekend for the city that revealed the secret of paper to the world, when in the year 751 two mandarins confessed it under torture. In addition, Venkatesh will travel to Russia to give a lecture next week, and Whitney and Parvaneh are in talks with Annula about traveling to Samarkand.

“And us?” Anaïs asked me, with that indignation only those who feel singled out truly know. “I feel like we’re being excluded without them even revealing their biases.”

“They want to demoralize us,” I comforted her, “but neither you nor I suffer from the envy the world so loves to preach. Besides, we should accept these petty cruelties as advantages: while they’ll be dealing with customs and hotels, we’ll get to spend our time reading our favorite books in our peaceful apartment, listening to the

Beethoven sonatas that just arrived from England. I'm already on page 103 of *Du côté de chez Swann*."

Anaïs smiled, stroking the volume I'd recommended to her, Vladimir Jankélévitch's *Le Pardon*. I didn't mention to her that, of the more than three hundred CDs we'd shipped from Manchester, barely eighty had actually arrived.

"They were probably stolen," was the postal clerk's blunt comment when I pointed out that the original box had been opened.

Yesterday, on our way out of the University, we ran into Gulmira and Suhrab, and shared a coffee with them in the central park. Autumn was extending its first shift of colors over the walnut and fir trees. We talked about the unfounded fears certain Westerners—Anaïs's family among them—have about Bishkek's food and supermarkets. My comment didn't sit well with Anaïs, who asked whether it was normal that people still used washing machines from the seventies. Gulmira said new washing machines could be found, but the Soviet ones were still in use, which proved they'd been built to serve the people for a long, useful life.

"And has he been interviewed yet?" Suhrab asked me.

When I told him no, he grew impatient.

"That's what the advanced journalism students do whenever international faculty arrive," he sighed. "I'll call the dean today myself, so she'll let us get to know you better."

"Would it be a feature piece, or an interview?" I asked.

"Haven't you read the piece they did on Gretchen?" Anaïs cut in. "It was rather cartoonish. They describe her as a woman who found her lifestyle in feminism, who doesn't want to marry, and who didn't study medicine because she considered it a profession

practiced only for money."

"Gretchen already requested a correction," Gulmira smiled. "She's not happy at all. What she actually said was that she never wanted to make a fortune as a doctor, though she certainly could have, since her father is a fairly well-known doctor in Frankfurt."

"She told me whoever interviewed her didn't take any notes," I nodded, "which every German considers thoroughly unprofessional."

"We're an oral culture," Suhrab replied, "unlike the countries that are part of Western culture."

"What is Western culture?" I asked. "Isn't it those of us who inherited Greek philosophy and the Judeo-Roman dogmas of Paul of Tarsus?"

"Do you consider Spanish speakers part of Western culture?" Gulmira asked, with a skeptical smile. "I've always thought the West was Germany, France, and England, maybe Italy."

"Spain was part of the Roman Empire," I nodded. "Seneca was born there, and wrote his work there, before Christianity even arrived. In England and Germany, meanwhile, the Aryans were still living in trees and caves."

"And your American ancestors?"

"Lived in well-organized cities, with irrigation systems and sewers. The custom of daily bathing, in fact, was imported from America."

"That's not what we've been taught," Suhrab replied, thoughtfully.

"We should doubt everything we're taught," I sighed. "It's something I learned from Juan Luis Vives and Aristotle: philosophy exists so we won't be deceived."

"I stopped editing *The Star* barely a year ago," Suhrab remarked after a brief pause, "and already they're improvising banalities."

Back home, I received an email with a series of condescending questions. They're going to publish my answers alongside those of my Russian classmate, Marcello

Novák. Arkadina is a woman with an evident fondness for games; she's hoping I won't answer them, or that I'll write some complaint that exposes me as presumptuous. I understood that this questionnaire wasn't meant to get to know me, but to pin me down into a caricature: the eccentric academic, the ridiculous Frenchman, the poet who takes himself too seriously. Naturally, I answered with what the French call *esprit*:

1. What is your name? Marco.
2. What is your orientation? Since life is dynamic and unpredictable, I'm skeptical of self-proclaimed orientations.
3. Any orientation you dislike? Vegetarians. Like most people today, they think of death as the worst possible event in life. Though I understand our fears, I don't understand why they extend their anxiety to that of animals. Besides, shouldn't they extend their compassion to potatoes and carrots too?
4. Which animal do you identify with most? The horse.
5. Who is guilty? Whoever cannot feel guilt.
6. Have you eaten snake? Not yet; though keep in mind we already eat thousands of microorganisms with every meal.
7. How many characters do you play? One, who, like animals and trees, fears—to quote Whitman—making a fool of himself.
8. Who are you? A man, in the sense Terence meant it: “*Homo sum. Humani nihil a me alienum puto.*”
9. Any suggestions to improve our University? I would ask the government to close the street in front of the University.
10. Do you like goat yogurt? I do.
11. Do you speak Kyrgyz? Я не знаю.
12. Do you consider your role at the University

important? As important as the role of anyone who works or studies at AUK.

13. Any type of student that irritates you? Students who want to be more American than the Americans themselves.
14. What is your worst nightmare? Forgetting a nightmare.
15. Do you eat snails? Baked, with butter and cilantro.
16. When can one quit smoking? When one understands that only oneself can do it.
17. What bothers you about a house? A broken bed.
18. Would you sleep on rugs? As long as they're clean, I wouldn't mind.
19. Have you ever wished to hurt someone? As far as I can recall, I have never harbored such a wish.
20. Your main passion? Writing.

I sent the answers. Arkadina will now have her caricature to hang on her office wall. But caricatures, I thought, switching off the light, can also grow uncomfortable when the model refuses to play the assigned part.

13. Before the Cream of Kyrgyz Academia

*Omnia habeo, neque quicquam habeo;
nihil cum est, nihil deficit tamen*
Terence

Bishkek, September 14, 2002

The morning of the conference, I was woken by the noise of garbage trucks in the street. It was six. Anaïs was still asleep; her breathing was slow, deep, that of someone who has learned not to let other people's anxieties steal her sleep. I got up quietly, made an instant coffee—the only kind we could get at the corner kiosk—and mentally ran through my slides. There weren't many: fifteen, each with one image and one line. I had prepared them the night before with a craftsman's patience, worried the projector might be old, or that the file format wouldn't be compatible with the Russian operating system.

At eight, Anaïs woke and found me in front of the IBM laptop we'd brought from Portugal—a four-kilo grey tank that had saved us from technical disaster more than once—going over, for the umpteenth time, the transition between slide seven and eight.

"Are you nervous?" she asked, sitting up.

"No," I lied.

"You look it."

I smiled; she knew me too well.

"It's not the first time I've spoken to an entire faculty," I admitted. "But this isn't just any faculty: Political Science. The cream of the crop, as they say here. Dorothy already warned me her students question everything."

"Worse for them," Anaïs said, and her tone was so calm that, for a moment, I felt more confident than I

actually was. "They have no idea how many hours you spend reading books in German and French."

I dressed carefully: navy blazer, white shirt, no tie. I didn't want to look like a banker or a missionary. I wanted to be someone who speaks about international communication and knows the language of his own clothes. Anaïs approved with a nod and wished me luck with a kiss on the cheek.

"You don't need it," she said, "but you have it."

I walked into the Political Studies faculty offices ten minutes early; it smelled of burnt coffee and old paper. On the walls, portraits of former rectors and former ministers watched me with the severity of those who are no longer here but still pass judgment from history. In the lobby I ran into Tom Robinson, walking ahead of Dorothy, coffee cup in hand. Tom's eyes had that glassy shine of a hangover not quite gone.

"Do you two already know each other?" Tom asked, as though introducing two strangers at a party.

Dorothy looked at me, remembering her humiliation; her mouth curved into something meant to be a smile but that couldn't quite pass for anything other than a look of appraisal. Her dress that morning was navy blue, sober in cut, in contrast to the gold neckline from the concert. I thought that today she'd come in armor, not with her airs of liberated British girl.

"His name is..." Dorothy hesitated, and the silence that followed was deliberate; she wanted me to know that I was one of those easily forgotten, that my time at the University, however brilliant, would leave no mark.

Her effort to irritate me brought a wide smile to my face. Far from feeling wounded, I saw that my best response to her contempt would be an unshakable, apparent naïveté.

"The professor you mistook for the unemployed husband of a Frenchwoman," I remarked, and watched her expression freeze for a few brief moments. "Haven't you

told Tom?"

Dorothy lowered her eyes, clenched her jaw, and forced a smile so strained it looked more like a wince of pain; nothing more pleasant, I told myself, than to begin my lecture to the Kyrgyz intelligentsia this way.

In a country that never approved its independence from the USSR at the ballot box, holding a degree in political science was the key to accessing a power that, through its corrupt practices, enriched its politicians. Proof of that was the fortune of Rector Gulmat, who had already served as a minister under Askar Akayev, the eternal president of his nation. All other graduates were then viewed at the University as future employees of that elite, which loved to display the most internationally influential American professors as trophies.

"Marco Noël is a very lively fellow," Tom cut in, with that neocolonial condescension so characteristic of older Americans. His hands trembled slightly as he held his coffee cup. "He's going to give us a lecture on what he himself has called International Communication."

"That's true!" Dorothy exclaimed, with feigned enthusiasm; her fingers drummed against the folder tucked under her arm.

"How grateful we are that you accepted our invitation," Petra cut in, approaching us with Venkatesh. Her tone was polite, but her eyes—always appraising—swept over my outfit as though looking for something out of place.

"I should warn you our students are extremely critical, and they question everything," Dorothy declared.

"You already warned me," I nodded, wondering how they'd been trained to mock me, or whether the training simply consisted of letting them react to my knowledge.

"Can you believe President Askar told them they were better prepared than Westerners?" Petra sighed.

The students applauded themselves, and Venkatesh nodded, smiling.

"They argue their parents raised them on the dialectical legacy of Marx and Lenin," he said, "which has been badly misinterpreted in England, Europe, and, of course, the United States."

"I suppose, then," I said, sarcastically, "they've already studied Aristotle's *Politics*."

Silence was their answer.

"Give us a few minutes," Dorothy excused herself, leading Petra and Venkatesh toward a meeting room. "We're finalizing my exit paperwork."

"Dorothy's leaving for England," Tom explained to me, as though breaking exclusive news.

"To which city?" I asked, feigning enthusiasm.

"To do a doctorate at Cambridge," Tom said.

"Oh!"

Dorothy came back for him, baring her teeth in a triumphant smile. She held a scroll in her hand—her degree, her ticket out—clutching it like a scepter.

"Excellent!" I exclaimed. "What a beautiful town! It has a charming little river running through its meadows, with continuous rainy days that ensure students spend most of their time cooped up studying."

"Yes, yes," Dorothy said, suspecting my irony.

"Although it's true," I went on, "that these days its nightlife is rather more famous than its academic accolades, judging by that data-fabrication scandal involving one of its doctoral students."

The nearby students burst out laughing, and Dorothy flushed with impatience.

"I hope we run into each other there once we go back to England."

"We?" Dorothy looked at me with apparent cheer, but I saw the flush already climbing her cheeks.

"My wife and I," I predicted. "Cambridge isn't so far from Paris."

"Excuse us!" she said, dragging Tom into an adjoining room as though fleeing some invisible threat.

I noticed a group of students approaching. There were five; their backpacks bore patches of the Tajik, Chinese, and Uzbek flags. The tallest student held a thermos of tea with the ease of someone who's learned to drink it through every class.

"Are you the professor from the University of Manchester?" a girl with blue-dyed hair asked, wearing a sporty hoodie.

"The very one, and my main qualification now is knowing how to wait."

The students laughed; the one with the tea sat down on the floor, crossing his legs.

"I'm Daler," he said, "from Dushanbe. This is Nigora, from Samarkand; Temur, from Tashkent; Saodat, from Iran; and Zhenya, from right here, Moscow."

Nigora, the blue-haired one, leaned against the wall.

"We saw your name on the program," she said. "We said, let's go see if this guy is just another Chomsky with a Latin accent, or if he has something to say."

"Chomsky..." I murmured, and everyone laughed, as if we'd shared a private joke.

"Look at this," Zhenya said, pointing at a poster on the wall.

I got up. It was enormous. Two meters by four. A Star Wars parody: George W. Bush as Luke Skywalker, Condoleezza Rice as Princess Leia, Donald Rumsfeld as Han Solo. Obi-Wan was the father figure, Tony Blair a hairy Chewbacca, Margaret Thatcher a tiny Yoda. Sean Hannity shone as C-3PO, Gerhard Schröder buzzed like R2-D2, Jacques Chirac embodied Grand Moff Tarkin. And there, casting its shadow over everyone, Saddam Hussein beside an oil derrick mimicking the Death Star. The title: START the WAR.

I stood looking at it for a few seconds.

"A rather obvious satire," I said.

"Right?" Daler took a sip of tea. "A group of anti-American students made it last night, all egged on by Tom and Dorothy."

"What do you think of him?" Saodat cut in, tall, of Iranian descent, dressed in a long gown printed with jasmine and poppies, her Caspian accent soft.

I kept staring at the poster. The colors were bright, almost celebratory. American pop culture, even when they were mocking it, defined them.

"Those laughing at Bush and Rumsfeld in this poster," I said, "aren't they the same ones who watched a Hollywood movie last night, listened to hip-hop from Brooklyn, and bought sneakers made in Vietnam by an American company?"

"Isn't that a contradiction?" Saodat laughed.

"Or an irony they don't dare see," Temur, the Uzbek, added—quieter until then.

"I wonder," I said, more to myself than to them, "whether, laughing at this poster, they're also laughing, perhaps without knowing it, at the professors who encourage them. Aren't Tom and Dorothy, to them, just other imperialists disguised as educators? They come from the West and teach the concept of Western freedom this way..."

"That's a fair point," Nigora cut in. "Here, in the Soviet Union, we never knew of anyone criticizing the State, not until the afternoon it fell apart."

Zhenya shrugged.

"Do you know what a tutor told me my first semester? That the sine qua non for becoming a respected politician in the West was cynicism toward power. That you didn't have to read or research. That with a dozen fashionable arguments from academic circles, endorsed by the scholarly celebrity crowd, you were already made."

"And the guru of cynicism," Daler went on, raising

his cup as though offering a toast, “was Noam Chomsky. Linguist at MIT, in Chicago. Fierce critic of the United States since... well, since Massachusetts.”

“He never taught in Cuba,” I nodded. “Never in Iran, but he wrote titles that said it all: *American Power and the New Mandarins*, *Manufacturing Consent*, *Deterring Democracy*, *Profit over People*.”

“It’s fashionable,” Saodat said.

“It’s just too easy,” I nodded. “It’s a manual, a shortcut. And in universities, things get repeated like mantras that no one debates. They’re the new dogmas of an old, buried inquisition.”

Temur pulled out a notebook. He’d been carrying it hidden in his backpack, as though consulting it were a transgression.

“I read something a guy wrote about this,” he said, flipping through it.

“I’ve been working through nine axioms no one refutes at universities because academia sympathizes with terrorists and communists. Sounds exaggerated, but listen...”

The others gathered closer. I stayed standing, next to the Star Wars poster, while the hallway filled with more students stopping to ask whether I was the guest speaker.

“Let’s go point by point,” I went on, and noticed my voice had changed, that I’d unconsciously slipped into the tone I use when teaching informally, in a place where people can leave whenever they like.

“One: oil is the cause of every war. That’s economic reductionism. World War I was nationalist and dynastic. World War II, ideological. Korea and Vietnam, geopolitical. The Balkans in the nineties, ethno-religious. Rwanda, Sudan, Myanmar... where’s the oil there? Besides, China and India consume more oil than anyone and don’t fight wars over it. It’s a conspiratorial simplification that absolves local regimes and non-Western expansionist

movements of blame.”

Nods. A girl who hadn’t spoken took notes in her notebook.

“Two: the United States is the 1% enslaving the 99%. ‘Slavery’ implies the ownership of persons, abolished in the U.S. in 1865. Using it as a metaphor trivializes the real victims of contemporary trafficking, mostly in Africa and Asia. Economically, the growth of the middle class in China, India, and Vietnam—made possible by trade with the West—contradicts the idea of global slavery. And the international financial system isn’t imposed: sovereign countries voluntarily seek foreign investment. Social mobility in Latin America, Asia, and Africa shows that not everything is rigidly determined.

“Three: every terrorist group represents an oppressed community. A generalization that absolves crimes against humanity. ISIS enslaved Yazidis and murdered Christians. The Taliban oppress women, they don’t liberate them. The FARC kidnapped and recruited child soldiers. Sendero Luminoso massacred indigenous people. The legitimacy of a cause doesn’t automatically legitimize its methods. Deliberate terrorism against civilians is a crime, not resistance.

“Four: every tyranny was created by the United States. An exaggerated view of historical agency. Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot, Kim Il-sung, the ayatollahs, Idi Amin, Mugabe, the Taliban... who created them? The USSR bankrolled communist regimes. China backs North Korea. Latin American caudillismo has pre-Columbian, colonial, and Creole roots. And the U.S. also promoted democracies: West Germany, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan. It sanctioned dictatorships too. Counting only the negative is confirmation bias, not analysis.

“Five: if the U.S. redistributed its billionaires’ wealth, the world would live in peace. Arithmetically false. Five trillion dollars split among eight billion people comes to six hundred dollars per capita. Insufficient. Wealth

consists of productive assets; expropriating them would destroy jobs and innovation. Historically, forced redistribution has produced famines, stagnation, and new corrupt elites. Peace depends on institutions and political culture, not just resources. Rwanda and Yugoslavia had resources and lacked cohesion.

“Six: the family is a patriarchal invention that blocks women’s political fulfillment. This confuses historical forms with the institution itself. Matrilineal families exist, as do cooperative childrearing structures. Indira Gandhi, Benazir Bhutto, Isabel Perón all wielded power within family structures. The family is a protective network, a means of transmitting values, a source of psychological wellbeing. The decline of the nuclear family in the West hasn’t correlated with greater female political participation, but with loneliness and child precariousness.

“Seven: non-white, non-heterosexual, non-Christian people are oppressed and must be compensated. This treats categories as homogeneous. A Black entrepreneur in Atlanta can have more capital than a white miner in Appalachia. Asian immigrants in Silicon Valley out-earn the white average. Group-based compensation ignores within-group variability and perpetuates victimization stereotypes. Meritocracy, imperfect as it is, has lifted up millions of non-white immigrants. Race-based affirmative action has been struck down as unconstitutional in several states for discriminating on immutable characteristics. Social justice requires universal policies based on class, not essentialized identities.

“Eight: industry causes the greenhouse effect, and we only have a hundred years left. This mixes a partial truth with catastrophism. Industrialization raised life expectancy from thirty to seventy years: sanitation, food, medicine. Pre-Columbian indigenous peoples also altered their environment: Amazonian deforestation, megafauna extinction. The energy transition and technological

efficiency offer intermediate paths. Apocalyptic ‘hundred years’ predictions have gone decades without coming true. The solution isn’t to give up progress, but to steer it.

“Nine: every critic of Marxism, socialism, communism, or liberalism is a closet fascist. *Ad hominem* fallacy. Critics of Marxism include Karl Popper, Isaiah Berlin, Václav Havel, Solzhenitsyn, Simone Weil. Liberalism defeated both fascism and communism, guaranteeing freedoms that Marxism-Leninism abolished. This axiom is a tautology: it defines any dissent as fascism, making Marxism immune to criticism. That’s characteristic of totalitarian ideologies, not of critical thought.”

When I finished, the hallway was silent. Then, applause. Not much, but sincere. There were already more than twenty students. Someone asked if I could teach in the Political Science department; someone else offered me tea.

Then I saw Tom and Dorothy appear around the corner of the hallway. They’d been there ten minutes, I could tell from Dorothy’s rigid posture, arms crossed, notebook pressed to her chest. Tom watched with narrowed eyes, calculating the damage. They’d arrived in time to catch half of point eight and all of point nine. They had stayed on purpose, waiting for me to finish—or perhaps hoping I’d stumble.

“My friend Saint-André,” Tom said, approaching with a smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “Forgive the delay; the introductory meeting ran longer than expected.”

“Of course,” I answered. “In the meantime, your students have done me the favor of reminding me why I teach.”

Dorothy said nothing. She only wrote something in her notebook, with a sharp, quick motion, like someone logging evidence for a later question.

“The auditorium’s ready,” Tom said, turning. “If you’ll follow us.”

I picked up my bag. The twenty students dispersed,

some looking like conspirators, others simply satisfied. Zhenya, the one from Moscow, patted me on the shoulder as he passed.

"That was good, friend," he murmured. "I agree with all of it, completely."

"What a relief," I answered, cheerfully.

And I followed Tom and Dorothy into the auditorium, where a hundred dark wooden seats waited, and where a ceiling-mounted projector—Soviet-era, it seemed to me—displayed my first slide: a globe crossed by fiber-optic cables.

"Good morning," I said into the microphone, in my best British accent, the one I keep for when I need to be taken seriously. "I promise not to bore you too much."

Laughter dissolved the tension. I saw some people relax into their seats. Others crossed their arms, defensively. In the back row, Dorothy opened her notebook. In the front row, Tom crossed his arms and stared into space.

But among the middle rows, out of the hundred, I recognized several of the twenty from the hallway.

I connected the computer, the lights went out at a signal I gave Gretchen, and the slides began to light up the room.

"Is it possible for us to communicate in the age of globalization?" I said, pointing to the image of a computer with a Netscape server. "Reactionaries believe not. They announce that the Internet fever is fleeting, that it will never surpass the standing of books and encyclopedias published by the world's most reputed centers of knowledge. It's a position much like that of film directors who proclaim that digital film is disposable consumer product, and will never reach the perfection of chemical emulsion on a 35-millimeter reel."

A student in the third row was taking notes with feverish speed. Beside him, a girl with dark blonde hair

chewed the end of her pen without writing. In the back, someone whispered something that made their neighbor laugh.

"But that very stance reveals the crisis in academia," I went on. "In the past—and I'm talking about barely ten years ago—the intellectual owned knowledge. It was he or she who bought the books, kept them in a library, read them, and then, as proof of that arduous labor, communicated chapters to which, they knew, the audience had scant access. Local newspapers and magazines were, at best, the ordinary citizen's windows onto the world. Only universities, politicians, and influential businessmen could afford subscriptions to international magazines and newspapers, and only those who had diligently studied several languages had access to the content of those subscriptions."

I watched Tom nod slowly. Dorothy, meanwhile, wrote feverishly in her notebook without looking up.

"Today, however," I went on, switching to the next slide, "immediate access to the world's newspaper portals is no longer a privilege, but a right. Those newspapers that have chosen to charge for access are visited less and less; the portals that fund themselves through advertising gain more readers. The crisis of the great newspapers is already visible in the rise of private portals fostering new points of view."

A hand went up in the fourth row. It was a student with a faint beard, wearing an Indiana University hoodie.

"Don't you think," he asked, in halting English, "that this supposed democratization of information really just drowns us in unfiltered data? My father says that in the past people trusted newspapers; now anyone can publish anything on the Internet."

"Your father is right," I answered, "but he also forgets that newspapers were never impartial. The difference is that in the past, the filter was invisible; now it's questionable. And questioning is the first step toward

thinking.”

Some students applauded. The girl with the pen stopped chewing it and began writing.

I switched to the next slide: an image of six newspapers from different countries.

“I’ll pull up here, for example, today’s editorials from several papers. The New York Times warns readers of the dangers looming over individual liberties, given that the Court is hearing the Justice Department’s arguments for wiretapping the phones and computers of terrorism suspects. The Times believes a coalition against Saddam Hussein is imminent, and that Saddam will most likely accept the coalition’s terms rather than choose certain defeat. *Le Monde*, by contrast, warns that any aggression against Iraq will be repelled by the Iraqis. *Il Corriere della Sera* fears a new attack might trigger new incidents like those of September eleventh. *El Mundo* follows the Italian line and leaks a speech by the UN Secretary, Annan, warning the United States it has no authority to attack Iraq. Finally, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* focuses on Arafat’s loss of power before the Palestinian parliament, applauding the fact that there is ‘some semblance of democracy’ in the Arab world.”

I paused to let them absorb the information. The faces in the auditorium were attentive, some with their mouths slightly open. Even the bearded student had stopped taking notes and was staring at me intently.

“What can we conclude from all this?” I asked, answering my own question. “That while the United States and England are pushing for war to overthrow Saddam Hussein, the French, Germans, Spaniards, and Italians oppose it to varying degrees. And none of these positions is the truth. They are interpretations. The citizen who reads a single newspaper has one interpretation; the one who reads six, has six. The globalization of information doesn’t give us answers; it gives us the freedom—and the

responsibility—to choose between answers. Free yourselves from the straitjackets of your cultural zones, and you will gain a universal standard, the standard of a citizen of globalization.”

I paused again. I took a sip of water. I felt the auditorium breathing as one.

“But allow me to go further,” I said, “because what I’ve described so far is merely the threshold of the problem. The real issue isn’t technical. It isn’t a matter of access. It’s a matter of habit. Of acquired custom. Of intellectual laziness, elevated, over time, to the status of civic virtue.”

I projected a new slide: a newsstand crammed with papers.

“We live in societies that have taught us to settle. To trust. To delegate thinking. We are told, from childhood, that there are institutions meant to think for us: the government, the Church, the university, the paper of record. And we, docile, even grateful, accept that delegation as a service. As though thinking were a luxury, or a risk, or an impertinence. There’s a word for that state: heteronomy. Living under another’s law. Kant contrasted it with autonomy, which means giving oneself one’s own law. Intellectual heteronomy is the most elegant form of servitude.”

Someone in the front rows let out a nervous laugh, of excitement and recognition.

“And this habit,” I went on, “is not exclusive to the countries we call developing, nor to dictatorships, nor to societies with low literacy rates. It’s a cross-cutting, universal habit, one that crosses classes, latitudes, and ideologies; it exists in the most established democracies. It exists in the richest countries. And it exists, curiously, with even greater subtlety, precisely where freedom of the press is most boasted about.”

I changed the slide. Now an image of Manchester appeared: rain on cobblestones, red-brick façades, Market

Street on a Sunday morning.

"I lived in Manchester for several years. And Manchester taught me something no classroom had ever revealed: that information is both a destination and a road. The English—and I say this with genuine admiration, not the easy sarcasm sometimes aimed at them—have an extraordinary habit. On Sundays, they don't buy a newspaper. They buy newspapers, plural; as many as nine different publications can coexist on an English family's kitchen table on a Sunday morning. The Observer, the Sunday Times, the Independent on Sunday, the Mail on Sunday, the Guardian Weekend, the Sunday Telegraph. And alongside them, bound in its characteristic magazine format, a satirical pamphlet called Private Eye."

Several students exchanged puzzled glances.

"Private Eye," I explained, smiling, "is a publication that, since 1961, has respected nothing and no one. It mocks power with a ferocity no major newspaper allows itself. It publishes the stories serious papers don't dare to, out of fear of advertisers, lawyers, or editors. It has been sued hundreds of times. It has won most of those lawsuits. And it has, proportionally, more loyal readers than many of the papers that look down on it. Satire, ladies and gentlemen, is not a minor genre. It is the thermometer of a democracy: when satire can exist without being persecuted, society is breathing. When it disappears, something has rotted."

The bearded student raised his hand again.

"And doesn't that create confusion?" he asked. "Reading nine papers with nine different positions, plus a satirical publication mocking all of them... how does one form a coherent opinion?"

"Exactly that way," I answered. "Through one's own will, not by receiving it from others who think for us. And here I must cite Spengler, who, in his crowning 1918 work, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, announces academia's

greatest ill: that with journalism, the human being stops thinking, for that function is delegated to the opinion writers of this or that newspaper. My proposal, the one I present to you today, is the solution to that very ailment Spengler denounced. The coherence formed after reading nine different accounts of the same event is infinitely more solid than that handed to us ready-made and wrapped in a single editorial, since if the first kind of coherence is merely informational, the second is referential, and the third, interpretive. And it is precisely by comparing versions of the same event, as any lawyer well knows, that judges arrive at their verdicts."

A ripple of approving laughter ran through the auditorium. Dorothy finally looked up from her notebook.

"It was in Manchester, then, that I picked up that Sunday habit," I went on. "But it was also in Manchester, thanks to the early democratization of the Internet, that I discovered a parallel habit, perhaps a bolder one: reading the press in other languages. Le Monde on a Tuesday. La Repubblica on a Wednesday. El ABC any morning. Der Spiegel when European politics turned especially interesting. It was a gymnastics of judgment. And each language, I came to understand, is not merely a vehicle: it is a way of seeing reality or, as Wittgenstein would have it, is reality itself, conditioned. The French build their arguments with a Cartesian architecture Anglo-Saxons find pedantic. The Germans subordinate their clauses to extremes that reveal a way of thinking that refuses to give up complexity. The Spanish have a rhetorical passion the Nordic peoples read as imprecision. Reading in several languages isn't just understanding different views of the world; it's inhabiting different perspectives, or, as Truman Capote beautifully puts it, conquering other voices, other realms."

A voice from the back—I couldn't see who—interrupted:

"But not all of us have studied languages; that's a

privilege.”

I stopped. It was a fair objection that deserved a fair answer.

“You’re right,” I said, looking toward the back. “Today, knowing languages is an advantage. And like every advantage, it can become a tool of exclusion if we do nothing to fix it. But allow me to ask you something: do you remember the first time you heard about the Internet? Do you remember what people told you? That it was a thing for engineers. That it was too complicated. That the ordinary citizen would never need it. And yet, here we are.”

I projected a new slide: bilingual digital dictionary programs.

“I hold a firm conviction—and I say this as a conviction, not a scientific prophecy—that in the not-too-distant future, digital advances will let any citizen access any newspaper in the world, in their own language, in real time, with a fidelity that seems impossible to us today. Machine translation systems are no longer the joke they were a decade ago. They’re improving at a speed that even startles their own creators. The day will come—and it won’t take as long as we think—when the language barrier is not a wall, but a revolving door. When reading *Le Monde* in Spanish, or *El Mundo* in Mandarin, or *The Times* in Swahili, will be as simple as changing the channel.”

The auditorium remained silent; my dreams, those of an artist and poet foreign to their field, kept them from the boredom their professors had subtly signaled would follow.

“But,” I raised a finger, “that day will not have fully arrived unless citizens have already cultivated the habit of looking beyond. Technology can tear down the language wall. It cannot, on its own, tear down the mental wall of someone who has never felt curious about what someone else thinks. The tool isn’t enough if the hand doesn’t rise to demand it.”

I switched the slide. Now a world map appeared, with connecting lines between continents, like the diagram of a planetary subway system.

“Let’s go back to the beginning,” I said. “Today, here, in this room, we have access to something no generation before ours ever had: the real possibility of listening to the world. Not our neighborhood, not our nation, not our language: the world, its contradictions, its fears, its hopes, its incompatible versions of the same events. It is a dizzying privilege, and, like every dizzying privilege, it has two outcomes: the dizziness can paralyze us, or it can propel us.”

I turned off the last slide. I asked Petra to bring the lights up a bit. I wanted to see the faces.

“What can we conclude from all this?” I asked, for the second time in the lecture, deliberately. “That the citizen of the twenty-first century has no excuse to be a citizen of only one newspaper; that intellectual conformity is not a fate, but a choice, sometimes an unconscious one; that the habit of reading a single outlet, of listening to a single voice, of inhabiting a single perspective, is the most comfortable—and most dangerous—way of believing oneself informed when, in fact, one is being indoctrinated. The globalization of information does not give us answers; it gives us the freedom—and the responsibility—of choosing among many voices.”

I stepped away from the lectern. I continued without looking at my notes.

“Free yourselves from the straitjackets of your cultural zones. Seek intellectual discomfort. Read what contradicts you. Listen to those who think differently, not to refute them, but to understand them. Be citizens of globalization: those who travel farthest when reading a text, those who think most broadly. And if today you cannot read in French, or German, or Arabic, do not resign yourselves: demand the tools to do so. They will come, because satisfied curiosity is the best answer to our

freedom.”

I finished my presentation with applause across the room, dutiful at first, then spontaneous, the kind that comes from an audience that has been caught off guard. I saw Gretchen smile from the round table. Whitney winked at me. Tom raised his hand in a gesture I couldn’t tell was praise or a military salute.

Dorothy rose from her seat in the back row without applauding. She walked toward the center of the auditorium with a theatrical slowness, stopped in front of the lectern, crossed her arms, and looked at me with a smile that didn’t reach her eyes.

“My greatest concern,” she said, and her voice carried through the room with a rehearsed clarity, “is: what is the thesis of your talk? We’ve just witnessed a series of speculations about the future of technology, but does all of it relate to international communication, whose scope, in my opinion, is far broader? Thank you.”

The auditorium held its breath. I watched some students turn to look at her, then look back at me. It was a full-fledged attack, and I knew it.

“Interesting questions,” I nodded, taking a sip of water from the glass left on the lectern. “First, let’s understand what a thesis is. Every thesis is of one of two types: causal or effect-based. Mine was effect-based, and I may have failed to spell it out clearly enough: the rise of the Internet is enabling the creation of new relationships between human beings across different nations. As for your second concern...”

I paused. The room remained silent.

“...it’s fitting to bring up the models of Victorian communication in India, where an efficient postal service helped organize an empire. Comparing those models with the new communication channels the Internet is generating shows us something fundamental: there are two key elements in the formation of any community:

communications and supply chains. The Internet delivers both, albeit on a virtual plane.”

“And impartiality?” Tom cut in from his seat, without raising his hand. “What you’re preaching is impracticable today. There aren’t enough people who read newspapers in six languages, and the Internet’s translation tools are rudimentary.”

“In that case, we must rely on polyglot educators,” a student of Asian descent cut in, with a pronounced accent, who had been sitting attentively in the front row of the semicircle until then.

She stood, adjusted her glasses, and continued:

“I’ll introduce myself: I’m Hun-Sue, from China. Professor Saint-André hasn’t said we all need to read six newspapers; he’s said we can now do so if we want to. That’s a possibility our parents never had.”

A murmur ran through the auditorium. Someone applauded. Dorothy went pale.

“Even so,” Tom cleared his throat, “I don’t think it’s enough to read between the lines to arrive at a proper grasp of reality. From the news item you gave as an example, can we conclude whether the war in Iraq is a good idea right now, or not?”

“No war is a good idea,” I answered, “and that depends on the historical readings the listener brings to it. What we can conclude is what political education will look like, should that war come to pass.”

“I notice a contradiction,” Dorothy cut in from the back row, and her voice now carried an edge it had lacked before. “On the one hand, you predict the Internet will develop tools for the full translation of what we read; on the other, you tell us we must learn languages to gain access to the globalized era. Doesn’t your own theory demonstrate the futility of learning new languages?”

I felt the room hold its breath. Dorothy had thrown her first punch.

“In the same way there are operators at nuclear

power plants preventing a global catastrophe,” I replied, weighing every word, “without our trusting purely in mechanical safety systems (which, as we know, failed at Chernobyl), genuine translators are necessary to explain the subtexts of language. A good translation based only on standard usage isn’t enough, because every language will always have unique turns of phrase that offer an understanding of reality no dictionary could ever contain. Take, for instance, the English expression ‘we came to a compromise.’ How would you translate that into Russian?”

The tense pause that followed seemed to last an eternity. Every eye turned to Dorothy, who, despite her reputation as a linguist, did not dare to translate the phrase. Instead, she looked at a thin, dark-haired young man with hair slicked back in the style of Elvis Presley.

“Мы пришли к компромиссу,” said a student I recognized as the President’s court jester, from the back of the auditorium, standing up. “That’s an acceptable translation, indicating we’ve reached an agreement. Allow me to introduce myself, Dr. Saint-André: I’m Oleg Garshoski, the University’s official translator.”

“What would you say, Tom?” I replied.

Tom frowned. His trembling hand reached for his empty coffee cup.

“It refers more to giving ground in a negotiation,” he said, indignantly. “You’re making me look bad, my friends. How many times have I told you that peace in this region requires a compromise between the populations of the north and south?”

The blank looks on the students’ faces revealed they had never understood Tom.

“The problem,” I explained, “isn’t the dictionary. Компромисс exists in Russian and correctly translates ‘compromise’; but words don’t live only in dictionaries, they also live in the political history of peoples. For an Englishman, ‘compromise’ suggests civility and

pragmatism; for many Russians, on the other hand, компромисс still carries the flavor of a humiliating concession, of a forced surrender.”

A murmur of repeated words and quiet questions confirming what I’d said spread through the auditorium.

“As you can see, every language carries a philosophical framework that shapes how we see the world. Those who master more languages have a sharper view of reality.”

A murmur ran through the audience. This time it wasn’t doubt, but astonishment. I saw Hun-Sue jotting something down in her notebook with a smile; I heard Gretchen explaining my theory in Russian to a fellow student.

Dorothy didn’t give up; she took a step forward, her voice sharpening further.

“I admit the linguistic example is clever,” she said, “but your lecture suffers from something far more serious: naïve optimism. You speak of the Internet as though it floats in midair, when it’s built by American companies, with American interests. Who controls the servers? Who funds the undersea cables? Who decides what content reaches Kyrgyzstan and what gets blocked at the border? Your technology isn’t neutral; it’s another instrument of power. And by presenting it as a tool of emancipation, you’re doing imperialism’s dirty work, without even realizing it.”

A dense silence fell over the room. Someone coughed. I saw Hun-Sue stop writing and look up. The attack was turning visceral.

“You’re right, Dorothy,” I answered, weighing every word. “Optimism without analysis is naïveté, but cynicism without a proposal is paralysis. I never said the Internet would save us; I said it gives us tools. What we do with them is no longer a matter of technology, but of education; you remind me of those who believe the world would be more peaceful by getting rid of action films, like

that Star Wars parody hanging at the entrance to this auditorium. And all of that, I dare say, is the responsibility of everyone in this room; neither the servers nor the undersea cables excuse us from thinking."

My reference to Star Wars set off no end of laughter. Dorothy held my gaze for a few more seconds. Her fingers drummed against her notepad for a moment, then stopped. She sat down without applauding and said nothing more.

"Do any students have questions on the matter?" Petra cut in, breaking the silence.

"Saodat!" Dorothy snapped at the Iranian student, who had risen from her seat. "What questions do you have?"

"Oh!" Saodat said, her voice clear, firm. "Actually, I don't have questions, but observations."

"Go ahead!" Petra cut in. "What would you recommend to Mr. Saint-André?"

"I thought this would be a rather vague lecture on diplomacy," Saodat replied, "but I have to admit I found it very instructive. Mr. Saint-André is a polyglot, and I want to thank him, on behalf of myself and my classmates, not only for this lecture, which encourages us to learn new languages, but also for the brief yet sharp conversation he had with us at the entrance to this hall. And I suggest we have him teach in this program next semester."

Widespread applause swept through the auditorium, a sincere ovation in the middle of the performance.

Tom rose from his seat, placed his hand on my shoulder in a gesture of thanks, and announced that I would surely be invited back in two months to give another lecture, on film this time.

Needless to say, that invitation never came.

Saodat, Hun-Sue, and Venkatesh surrounded me on my way out to press me on several points from the

lecture. I answered by applying my theory to the extinct Soviet Union.

"In the age of the Internet, I doubt the Soviet Union would have collapsed," I said. "There are plenty of bureaucratic circles sympathetic to the left, even in the United States."

"It was a propaganda battle," Venkatesh cut in.

"Precisely," I nodded. "It would have been debated, for instance, whether the 1969 moon landing was real, or a media fabrication."

"The Americans didn't land on the moon?" Hun-Sue asked, with a hint of indignation.

"There's a documentary that denies it," I nodded. "Have you never discussed it? It would make a good topic for a future conference."

Hun-Sue walked me home along Oak Park. The walnut trees' leaves were beginning to turn yellow, and the afternoon sun filtered through the canopy in a golden light.

"I'm glad your lecture silenced more than a few," she whispered, confidentially, once we'd drifted away from the group.

"Whom?" I asked, though I already knew.

"Almost everyone," she answered. "They think that because you're Colombian, you were born with less intelligence than them. Here, Colombians used to come to study, not to teach. You broke the order."

"Ah," I hesitated.

"Your arrival at the University has unsettled a lot of people," she said. "It's one thing to have to put up with the authority of American and European professors; it's another for you to come and lecture them."

"That popular in under a month?"

Hun-Sue laughed, pleased, but her smile grew unreadable.

"I'm only telling you out of sympathy," she added, her voice dropping. "I know you're going to help all of us."

She held out her hand. I shook it. Her fingers were

cold, but her grip was firm, almost masculine. Then she walked off down the street without looking back. I couldn't tell whether it had been a warning, a provocation, or an offer of alliance. Perhaps all three.

14. My Cuban Friend

*So how are we going to face death when our bodies
are already destroyed?*
José Lezama Lima

Bishkek, September 17, 2002

Yesterday, after Russian class, Marcello came up to me. His notebook was open to the page where he'd written out the declension of possessive adjectives, but his eyes weren't on those lines.

"Your lecture made a deep impression at the University," he told me, quietly, as though afraid someone might overhear.

"In what sense?"

"The Political Studies faculty have always looked down on the other departments," he explained. "Your talk about how language limits our understanding of the world has given people plenty to talk about. And not all of it good, of course. Some say an artist shouldn't get involved in matters of international politics."

"And do you believe them?"

"That's what they say," he nodded. "But they also say Dorothy went through a tremendous embarrassment. Someone heard her say in the hallway that you don't respect academic authority."

"She probably heard about my nine critiques of every university's biases."

"Exactly! As though authority were earned through fame and important posts, and not through arguments."

I smiled, but without joy.

"I would have liked more time," I said. "Alfonso Reyes, the great Mexican intellectual, then his country's ambassador to Argentina, tells the story of how war nearly broke out between Brazil and Argentina over a headline

published in São Paulo toward the end of the Second World War: 'Argentina apenas conseguiu ser uma potência neutra.' In Spanish, *apenas* means 'barely,' 'with great difficulty'; in Portuguese, it simply means 'only.' With the correct translation—Argentina only just managed to be a neutral power—Reyes showed that the piece actually revealed the Brazilian press's sympathy toward Argentina, for having slipped free of the grip Germany wanted to impose on it."

"That's exactly what you demonstrated with 'compromise,'" Marcello said.

I invited him to dinner at our place that night. Anaïs made a spiced lamb we'd bought at the bazaar, and Marcello arrived at seven sharp, with a bottle of red wine that must have cost him a fortune in a city where good wine is a rarity.

"Tell me about your family," I said as Anaïs served the soup.

Marcello took a sip of wine, and his eyes lit up.

"My grandfather was an Olympic medalist in swimming, in 1964," he said. "My father, in rowing, in 1980. My mother was a gymnast, though she never made it to the Games. I grew up believing the body is trained the same way the mind is. My grandfather used to say physical discipline is the foundation of moral discipline."

"And you?" Anaïs asked. "Did you compete too?"

"Swimming, like my grandfather," he said, and his smile turned bitter. "But a back injury took me out of the pool at eighteen. My father never fully forgave me for that. To him, leaving the sport was leaving the family."

"That's why you studied languages," I said.

"That's why," he nodded. "In languages I found a discipline that didn't depend on my joints. But my father still thinks I'm a deserter."

Anaïs served the lamb. The aroma filled the small living-dining room, and for a moment no one spoke.

"Rector Gulmat," Marcello said, suddenly, in a lower voice, "has been asking questions about you."

I set down my fork.

"About me?"

"About us," he corrected himself. "She found out we'd been talking in class about your lecture."

"Her informants are quite precise," I said, gathering that Arkadina was turning the rector against me. "She has spies glued to the classroom walls."

"She asked me what our conversation had been about."

"And what did you tell her?"

"The truth," Marcello smiled. "That we were expanding on the topic of your lecture."

"It's very strange that the rector would take an interest in my private conversations."

"It's not strange in this country," Marcello said, and his smile vanished. "I'd advise you to be careful about what you say, and to whom."

I took a sip of wine. The taste was sharp, but I welcomed the sting in my throat.

"It irritates them that I'm lecturing them on linguistics and the philosophy of language," I said, "and even more so that I do it without flaunting a doctorate."

"You have a Master of Fine Arts," Marcello said. "A terminal degree in the arts, as I understand it, in which a work of art replaces a doctoral thesis."

"My thesis was a documentary on agrarian reform in Colombia."

"Did you know that, to the Soviets, artists are considered inferior beings?"

"That doesn't surprise me," I said, thinking of Plato's arguments against poets in the third book of *The Republic*.

"It was part of my primary education," Marcello nodded. "According to Russian neurologists, Europeans have a more developed right hemisphere; Asians, the left."

The right hemisphere is what lends itself to science, economics, sport, and politics; the left, to the arts.”

“What nonsense!” I snapped. “So Michelangelo must have had Asian parents, and paper wasn’t a Chinese invention but a Greek emigrant’s.”

“That’s what they’ll tell you,” Marcello nodded, in a reverential tone that surprised me.

Anaïs, who had been listening silently, gave me a look I knew well: the one she wears right before changing the subject.

“Has Edward been talking about me?” she asked, with a casualness that chilled me.

Marcello looked at her, then at me.

“Yes,” he said. “He’s been saying you’re very beautiful, Mrs. Saint-André, and that he could help you get a job at his bank.”

“I don’t think that would be a good idea,” I cut in, before Anaïs could answer.

“Why?” Marcello asked.

“Because it’s obvious he wants to seduce her.”

Marcello’s eyes widened, surprised by my bluntness. Anaïs looked down, but didn’t contradict me. I refrained from admitting that I wasn’t the type to test my wife’s love against wealthy, influential men.

Shortly after, José and his wife Tatiana arrived. She’s a heavyset Uzbek woman of about forty, very talkative, with a laugh that fills any room. They brought a bottle of vodka bearing the “no hangover” seal—one of the priciest in the city—and a pickled vegetable salad Tatiana had made with her own hands.

Since Marcello and Anaïs don’t speak Spanish, Tatiana speaks only Russian, José speaks Spanish and Russian but barely any English, and I was trying to translate for everyone, the evening turned into a Tower of Babel that, to my surprise, we all enjoyed.

“Tell Marcello,” José said in Spanish, pointing at

the lamb, “that in Cuba we eat this with rice and beans, but in Kyrgyzstan it’s eaten with bread, and both ways are valid, because hunger doesn’t care about recipes.”

Marcello nodded gravely and answered in Russian, with such complexity that I had to ask José to translate his reply for me.

“He says,” José told me, “that in Czechoslovakia lamb is eaten with horseradish sauce, and that’s valid too.”

Tatiana cut in, in Russian, pointing her fork at Anaïs’s plate.

“She’s asking,” I translated into French for Anaïs, “why you haven’t eaten more; she says French women are too thin and it isn’t healthy.”

“Tell her,” Anaïs answered in French, with a mischievous smile, “that in France we’re used to eating little and judging a lot. But that her salad is delicious.”

I translated it into Russian for Tatiana, who let out a laugh so loud the neighbors must have heard it.

“The four of us,” José said, raising his vodka glass, “were lucky enough to marry for love. That’s not common anywhere in the world.”

We drank. The vodka burned my throat, but I downed it, trusting its promise not to leave a hangover.

“Don’t you miss Cuba?” I asked José, in Spanish.

José took another sip before answering.

“I miss the good cheer,” he said. “The wit. My grandfather, in the sixties, used to hide hams in a cellar under the manger whenever the police came to search the farm. We laughed at them while serving them bone broth.”

“Do you miss it?”

“Honestly, no,” José replied, and his voice turned grave. “I want Tomás and Andrea to finish high school and study at the American University. From there they’ll go on to exchange semesters in Iowa. Speaking Spanish, Russian, and English, they’ll succeed in life. In Cuba they never could.”

Tatiana, who hadn’t understood the conversation,

looked at us with her pale eyes and said something in Russian I translated for everyone:

"You Latinos always talk about politics. In Uzbekistan we're raised to instinctively avoid it, for the family's wellbeing."

Marcello praised her wisdom, and Anaïs remarked to me in French that this was precisely why conformity and resignation were the law of that land.

Questioned by José, I told him about my disagreements with my fellow professors, who, since my arrival, had made everything more difficult by the day.

"The difference between Cuba and Kyrgyzstan is a matter of nuance," José said, lighting a cigarette by the fogged-up window. "In Cuba, we all accept the lie. Here, everyone accepts that truth doesn't exist, or that it's dictated by those above."

"They give up being human."

"You still assume that, teaching at a Western university, it functions like a Western university: agreements, transparency, academic ethics... No, Marco. Here people learned to lie their whole lives. People live to survive, and to do that, they've learned when to speak, when to stay quiet, and, above all, when to play blind and obey."

"But I can't accept certain practices."

José let out a short laugh.

"There's the problem. Americans get certain quirks tolerated because they bring in money, date their students, and marry them, often leaving their first wives behind; unmarried European women are put up with, because they represent discipline and connections. But you're a poor Colombian, no connections, already married, you don't even have a European citizenship to offer; here, Colombia still stirs up all kinds of strange images: guerrillas, mercenaries, kidnappings, jungle... Don't try to explain too much. The more you justify yourself, the more

suspicious you look."

I stayed silent.

"They hate sincerity," he went on. "They've figured out you're not corruptible on certain things, that you say what you think, that you even teach students to tell the truth. Do you know how dangerous that sounds to people raised in systems where truth was always an administrative problem?"

Marcello raised his glass from across the table; Anaïs laughed, oblivious to our conversation. José waited for the noise at the table to cover his words again.

"I'm not telling you to become one of them. Just learn to float. Go with the current; smile, nod, get yourself a secret young lover, like every foreigner here does. Because if you insist on resisting every little bit of rot, you'll just create new problems for yourself."

"I already have them."

"You're going through the darkest part of the Soviet era in a matter of months," he studied me for a few seconds, a mix of affection and weariness. "I understand your principles; you're a Christian, you still believe truth has intrinsic value. But here, plenty of people learned another lesson over the decades: truth doesn't feed you, doesn't protect you, and sometimes doesn't even keep the person speaking it alive."

He glanced around before leaning in a little closer.

"Do you remember the former dean?"

I nodded.

"She was the one who first went to SEP asking for new professors to replace the old guard of Soviet journalists. The poor woman thought she could replace obedience and propaganda with impartiality and new media theories; that's something they never forgave her for. Officially, she died of a digestive complication. One day she woke up with an upset stomach, it got worse over two days, and that was the end of the story. You know how these things go: rumors, suspicions... And curiously, the

person who inherited her position was exactly the one people whispered about most in the hallways. But no one ever states anything outright. Around here, cleverness means never being the owner of a single sentence.”

The cigarette smoke rose slowly between us.

“I won’t tell you who it is, but you already suspect, because this country has a long memory and invisible ears. Your colleagues are aggressive toward you out of pure self-preservation instinct; someone who still takes their sense of social wellbeing seriously makes them uncomfortable. You remind them of a part of themselves they had to sacrifice years ago.”

Anaïs laughed with Marcello; José winked at me, and we stretched the evening out across four languages, five countries, and endless bursts of complicit laughter, celebrating, for a few hours, that happy fellowship that spared us Babel’s curse.

That week, before Sunday Mass, we went to buy flowers for the Virgin. We walked into a flower shop on Chuy Avenue and, seeing the two-hundred-som sign, asked for a dozen white roses. The shopkeeper showed us some long-stemmed roses, a meter tall, and asked whether we wanted them cut or with the stem. I said “cut,” and she lowered her face in surprise. Anaïs corrected me: better with the stem, since we didn’t know how deep the church’s vases were. When I went to pay, the shopkeeper refused my money: it was two thousand four hundred soms, not two hundred. The price had been per rose, not per dozen. I paid, flushed with embarrassment, and left with a bunch of white carnations, which was what we could afford.

At the church, Sister Edna received them with a smile as forced as Dorothy’s in the lobby.

“Thank you,” she said, and, without so much as a glance, set the carnations on a shelf in the sacristy, a sign that, in her eyes, the beauty of those blooms was less valuable than their exchange rate.

I left the sacristy empty-handed and with a bitter taste in my mouth that wasn’t only the carnation’s. For the rest of the Mass I couldn’t stop turning over that forced smile, that gesture of setting them down like someone setting aside an expired receipt. I realized I wasn’t hurt by the snub itself, but by what it meant: the Virgin, I thought, would have accepted the carnations. Our Lady, in any forgotten corner of Portugal or Colombia, would have received those flowers with the same gratitude a peasant woman shows for a freshly baked loaf of bread. But here, in this Central Asian church, the Virgin had been taken hostage by a bureaucracy of grace.

I watched Sister Edna’s stern expression, her blue eyes, her square jaw, her body dressed in an immaculate habit, unmistakable signs of a disciplined life. I remembered the Latin American churches of my childhood, where elderly women bring tallow candles and bundles of mint as offerings. I remembered Father Miguel at the San Judas Tadeo parish, who blessed even plastic flowers, because “God appreciates every effort.” There, amid cheap incense and the murmur of the rosary, faith withstood the damp and the melted wax, without ever pausing to weigh the value of each transaction.

But here, in this ex-Soviet corner of the world, where Catholicism is a minority faith of recent converts, everything seemed to have passed through the sieve of a cold efficiency. Sister Edna wasn’t ill-intentioned; I saw the altar already covered in carnations identical to mine and figured such flowers were already accounted for in the parish’s weekly budget, which made my donation redundant.

Her gesture was that of someone who had learned to survive in hostile terrain, measuring every donor by the yardstick of approval or disapproval—a subtle and effective way of stirring emotions that might swell the parish’s meager budget.

My carnations lacked the symbolic height of the

roses she had casually recommended at our previous meeting, and fell short of the threshold of presentability. Catholic worship in Kyrgyzstan could only compete in dignity with the marble mosques and Orthodox cathedrals of the region if backed by excellent donors of long-stemmed roses.

I had made an uncomfortable, unnecessary offering, and Edna, setting them down on the shelf—without looking at them, without smelling them, without saying “how lovely”—expressed the full hypocrisy of performative charity. Her gesture recalled that of the parish priest at the cathedral near Baker Street in London, who would stare with excessive scrutiny at the pound coin we handed him on the way out of Mass, meant “to feed the poor in Asia.”

I left the church regretting having brought flowers there at all, recalling Quevedo’s verse:

Poderoso caballero es Don Dinero.

Bishkek, September 19, 2002

The volumes I’d requested from Darixa arrived Wednesday afternoon, via Federal Express, from Hungary. That night I read John Keep’s *Last of the Empires: A History of the Soviet Union, 1945–1991*. One passage caught my attention especially: it recounts how Pyotr Yakir told his “investigating doctor” that if the only citizens considered normal were those who bowed obediently before every arbitrary act, then he must be abnormal, since he was incapable of such obedience.

It caught my attention because it described precisely the atmosphere at the University.

On Monday, Arkadina announced that tomorrow afternoon there would be a general faculty meeting, with students, professors, and administrative staff. But at that exact hour, SEP’s opening luncheon for the academic year has been scheduled, at the Hyatt Hotel, with faculty from

other universities also funded by our NGO.

I checked with Annula, who seemed surprised, and I wrote to Arkadina, who replied that she had already attended several opening events, and that the faculty meeting couldn’t be postponed, since almost all the professors work continuously in the media starting at four in the afternoon. She promised to give me the meeting minutes afterward.

From that moment on, I knew I would never see that document.

Bishkek, September 23, 2002

On Sunday we began our fourth bout of flu recovery. We think it’s the water in the tanks, since even though we buy bagged water, it’s impossible to avoid contact with the tap water while brushing our teeth. Filipa saw how poorly I looked and, at the end of my Russian lesson, suggested I swallow a clove of garlic every morning.

“The problem is the breath,” I objected.

“I’ll let you in on a secret,” she said, generously. “Just make a couple of cuts with a blade and swallow them whole. They’ll open up in your stomach without giving you bad breath.”

Anaïs didn’t seem convinced, so we went back to our doses of Antigrippin, which plunged us into long stretches of lethargy from which we only rose to go to work and eat.

Bishkek, September 24, 2002

Yesterday at noon, persuaded by the idea that one should eat where the locals eat, I took Anaïs to lunch at the open-air food stalls downtown. Around a large metal pot, a family made up of a father, a mother, two grandmothers, two grandfathers, and two children prepared and served portions of rice to passersby, who sat down at improvised wooden tables with plastic chairs.

“It’s busier than I thought,” Anaïs said, “and a bit

noisy.”

“That’s the charm of it,” I said, pulling out a chair for her.

We saw Whitney and Darixa crossing the avenue. Whitney wore a red hoodie, sneakers, and a shirt printed with an American flag; Darixa wore high heels beneath a red-and-black striped suit fitted to her body. Both tried to ignore us, but I got up and stepped into their path.

“Join us for a few minutes,” I said, pouring two glasses of ice-cold Coca-Cola.

“Is it true you’ve had six bouts of the flu, one after another?” Darixa asked me, studying Anaïs. “Might it be because of the hygiene at these popular restaurants?”

“This is the first time we’ve come here,” my wife answered, with a hint of indignation, “and no one dragged us here by force. We make our decisions together; the travel guides recommend trying the local flavors.”

“What I meant,” Darixa stammered, “was, what a shame. Around here, we give authority to whoever pays properly for a plate of food.”

Anaïs raised her eyebrows, displeased; if Darixa was unpleasant when she boasted, she was even more so when correcting herself.

“We have something different for lunch every day of the week,” Anaïs went on. “When Marco doesn’t make lunch for me, we go to the Turkish restaurant a block from our complex.”

“I know that one,” Whitney nodded. “The lamb skewers are excellent.”

“Or the Russian bistro on the same street,” Anaïs added.

“Where they make a hearty borscht,” I put in, “and those exquisite blinis...”

“We also eat at the University cafeteria sometimes,” Anaïs said.

“Then why are you eating somewhere this cheap?”

Darixa sounded irritated, but, seeing my startled expression, tried to correct herself. “What day do you eat at the cafeteria?”

“Every now and then,” Anaïs answered. “I know the French are creatures of habit, but Marco is Colombian. We honestly never plan our lunches.”

“Still, you’re talking to us about average restaurants,” Darixa cut in, with a haughty look. “Haven’t you been to the restaurants near the embassy district?”

“Once a month,” Anaïs nodded.

“Only?” Whitney replied. “My expenses here are minimal; in fact, I can live comfortably on just my University salary, going as often as twice a week to Bishkek’s fine dining restaurants. The five-thousand-dollar SEP stipend, I’ve kept it untouched. What about yours, Marco?”

“We’re using it,” I answered, surprised. “After all, there are two of us.”

“How odd,” Whitney hammered on, narrowing her raccoon-like eyes. “I always have money left over. When I got pregnant, dear Anaïs, my dean asked whether I’d be taking a semester off, and I said no. All men assume they can manipulate us however they please. And when I got divorced, I discovered my husband had been hiding thousands of dollars in bank accounts I never even knew existed.”

Whitney watched me, waiting for a reply. I smiled, thinking only Anaïs knew how many sacrifices I had made for her in Portugal, during the nearly two years she’d spent unemployed.

“Those restaurants you visit so often, dear Whitney,” I said, “aren’t so different from the Asian food places in London or Paris. We want to live like locals, not like tourists.”

“What a curious answer,” Whitney murmured. “Speaking of which, would you be interested in coming to the municipal pool in the afternoons? The monthly fee is

barely ten dollars.”

“Oh, yes!” Anaïs said. “I’d forgotten about that, with our flu.”

We agreed to take a taxi at five in the afternoon, in front of our building.

“We should get going,” Whitney excused herself, standing up.

“You pass by here often,” I remarked to Darixa. “From our apartment I’ve seen you leave that building several times. Do you do it every day?”

Darixa blushed, said goodbye claiming she had a report to submit, and hurried off down the street with steps so quick they looked like flight.

“They’ll say you’re being stingy with me,” Anaïs told me on the way home.

“I don’t think so,” I answered.

“It’s incredible how they try to turn us against each other,” she said, stroking my cheek.

“You’ll forgive my unkind thoughts,” I remarked, “but I believe Darixa has something to hide on this block.”

Anaïs didn’t answer. She just took my hand, and we walked in silence beneath the acacias of Chuy Avenue, while the autumn sun filtered through the leaves and the city remained, for us, a puzzle still to be solved.

Bishkek, September 25, 2002

The Soviet pool we visited yesterday is semi-Olympic, functional, and packed with people; set beneath a brass dome resembling a hangar, it has several swimming lanes and two diving boards. Poorly lit, the locker rooms look like the cells from the film *Midnight Express*. The floor is chipped and dirty, shared by swimmers and administrative staff alike, which makes me fear we might catch some fungus.

Whitney arrived late, as usual, her beach bag overflowing with towels and a plastic sleeve protecting

something I couldn’t quite make out. Gretchen was already in the water; she swam with a neat, methodical style, typical of someone raised on German discipline. Anaïs and Whitney began swimming through the lanes marked off by plastic buoys, and I stayed at the edge, watching the tungsten light fall over the diving boards.

I wanted to dip in for a few moments before starting my laps, but I noticed the lifeguards eyeing me impatiently, signaling that such behavior was more fitting for children than for an adult. I swam laps for twenty minutes, until I surfaced to get in line for the stairs leading up to the diving boards, standing tall beneath that harsh, yellowish light. I climbed the lowest one, and, once on the board, I read a sign in Russian stating that turning back was prohibited.

I felt a wave of vertigo. I had never dived from anything higher than two meters, and another sign told me I needed to clear ten meters before hitting the water. Someone behind me shouted for me to jump, and, without hesitating—without thinking—I pinched my nose with one hand and leapt.

The impact was so hard my hand flew off my nose, and I felt a powerful jet of water forced up into my skull. The water struck my nostrils like a fist. I barely managed to reach the surface, unable to breathe, coughing and spitting out chlorine, and swam to the edge, where I recovered amid a dizziness that blurred my vision.

Sitting up, I saw Whitney’s smiling face.

“You do know how to dive, don’t you?”

I nodded, though I didn’t.

“Your eyes are red,” she told me, pleased, and for an instant I read in her gaze an unwanted pity.

Gretchen came over then, drying her hair with a towel. She’d seen the whole thing, she told me, and pointed out that my technique had been terrible. I asked whether she’d seen me get flung off the board, and she nodded, with a smile I couldn’t tell was mockery or sympathy.

"That's the first time I've ever seen someone pinch their nose off a ten-meter board," she said.

"He looked like a kid on his first swim lesson," Whitney laughed, and I felt exposed, ridiculously watched. It was then I noticed she was wearing a wristwatch—an old model, in yellow gold, I hadn't seen before—which she set down on the edge of the pool while adjusting her swim cap.

"Watch my things," she told me, as though I were her personal assistant.

I nodded, purely out of inertia; the dizziness hadn't passed yet, and my vision was still blurred.

Gretchen dove in with a clean, silent, professional entry. Whitney followed with a clumsy but energetic style. I stayed at the edge, looking at the gold watch gleaming under the dim light. I wondered whether it was fake, since it evidently wasn't waterproof, and thought about picking it up and keeping it safe to return to her later. Something stopped me; I sensed I shouldn't touch it.

When they came out of the water, twenty minutes later, Whitney walked up to the edge and scanned the ground. Then she looked at me.

"Where's my watch?"

"You left it there," I said, pointing at the empty spot.

"It's not there."

Gretchen was drying her hair a few meters away. Anaïs came out of the water and walked over, not understanding what was going on.

"I saw it there a moment ago," I said, and my voice came out shakier than I wanted.

Whitney scanned the ground with theatrical slowness. She moved the towel. She checked her bag. She opened the plastic sleeve. She shook out her sandals.

"It's not here," she repeated, and this time her voice had a forensic edge to it. "Did you take it, Marco?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"You left it there," I said, pointing at the empty edge again. "I didn't touch anything. Besides, am I supposed to be some kind of custodian of other people's belongings?"

Gretchen watched us in silence. Anaïs looked at me with a mix of confusion and worry. Whitney checked her bag a second time, and a third. The atmosphere had turned heavy, uncomfortable. I felt everyone looking at me, as though something in my demeanor—the dizziness, the clumsiness, the fragility of the moment—marked me as responsible.

"Maybe someone took it while you were swimming," Anaïs said, trying to mediate.

"There was no one else here," Whitney replied, and it was true. The pool had been nearly empty at that hour.

The silence stretched on. I began to doubt myself. Had I touched the watch? Had I put it away without remembering? The blow to the head, the dizziness, the confusion... I wasn't sure of anything.

Then Whitney reached into the inner pocket of her beach bag, the one she used for keys and money, and her fingers brushed against something metallic. Her expression changed. She pulled out the gold watch, intact, and held it up in the air.

"Here it is," she said, her voice a whisper. "How strange. I don't remember putting it away."

Gretchen made a sound that could have been a cough or a stifled laugh. Anaïs looked at me, relieved. All I felt was a deep exhaustion, a certainty that something wasn't right about that whole scene. How had the watch ended up in her pocket? Who had put it there? Or had the whole "loss" been a test, a provocation aimed at me? I suspected she had put it away while grabbing her towel and then, upon discovering it, had had no choice but to fake the rest.

Whitney didn't apologize. She didn't say "I'm

sorry” or “my mistake.” She simply put the watch back on her wrist, adjusted the strap, and said:

“We should go; I have an early dinner.”

On the way out, I negotiated a return taxi ride, first to our apartment, then to Whitney’s. It would be forty-five soms.

“Which we’ll split three ways,” Whitney said, with a certain air of satisfaction, as though that small victory could make up for the humiliation over the watch.

I nodded, not daring to point out that we should split the fare between two, since they were charging for two separate rides. Gretchen had already left. The taxi pulled off under the afternoon’s yellow sun, and I looked out the window, distracted, wondering whether Whitney’s hysteria had been some kind of warning. But if it was, from whom? And against what?

15. The Irony That Revealed a Network of Complicities

*An absurd violence perverted their hearts, and
stirred in them a castaway’s fury, one that acknowledges
neither kin nor friend*
José Eustasio Rivera

Bishkek, September 27, 2002

Last night we received a surprise visit from Petra, Derogan, and Parvaneh. They greeted us with an effusiveness that struck me as rehearsed, and immediately voiced their shock at Venkatesh’s behavior.

“We went to his apartment first,” Petra said, eyes watery, “and without even opening the door, he told us it wasn’t his habit to receive unannounced visitors.”

“He must have a secret,” Parvaneh said, with a mocking smile, her eyebrows raised as though she knew something she wasn’t going to share. “I read that in his past he had identified as a member of a sexual minority...”

That piece of information, as subtly delivered as it was inappropriately shared, exposed Venkatesh while explaining everything at once. I watched its cruel effect on Petra’s crumbling expression.

“I don’t see why you’re getting upset,” Derogan told his fiancée. “If the Englishman wants privacy, it should be respected. Besides,” he added, with the practicality of someone closing out an account, “a friendship that requires frequent visits is an expensive friendship.”

“I thought we were friends,” Petra stammered, and there was something genuine in her cracked voice, something that made me think Venkatesh mattered to her more than she allowed herself to admit.

“Too much intimacy ruins friendships,” Anaïs

declared, and everyone nodded as though that were some wise Eastern proverb.

"We came to invite you two out to eat," Parvaneh said. "There are several things we'd like to discuss with you."

We took two taxis to eat laghman on the other side of the city. The restaurant was modest, the kind where locals dine and foreigners avoid because it's far from the city's trendy district, but the food was excellent.

After the first course, Parvaneh lowered her voice and told us her situation with Whitney had become untenable in the Anthropology Department.

"I found out this so-called Whitney hasn't published a book," she told us, indignantly, her fingers drumming on the table. "Not even an article."

I involuntarily glanced at Petra and Derogan, who hadn't published anything either. Petra looked down. Derogan, on the other hand, met my gaze indifferently, as though the question of authorship were a luxury for those without more pressing matters to attend to.

"That opportunist wins her students' trust by praising their weaknesses," Parvaneh went on, "and they believe her, simply because she's American: Southern, but American. The first day I met her I asked about the methodology she'd be using, and she turned her back on me. Later, in a meeting with the President, when asked about the students' level, she shamelessly said it was excellent. The truth is the students' command of English is fairly poor, but Whitney tells them what they want to hear."

"So she's not a doctor, then," I murmured.

"Isn't it obvious?" Parvaneh nodded, her smile as wide as it was venomous. "My assistant and I looked into her résumé online, since several students told me she mocks my heritage behind my back. 'There are foreigners,' she's said, 'who presume that, having earned a master's or

a doctorate in a developed country, they can act as though they were born there."

"Calculating," Anaïs said.

"Being American, she has an enormous entourage of admirers who applaud every bit of her clowning," Parvaneh added.

"Don't they flatter you too?" Derogan asked. "I mean, being British..."

"Whitney's jabs are meant to establish that those of us born in other nations have fewer privileges than the natives here," Parvaneh replied, ignoring the interruption, "and that applies to you too, Marco. We're both European citizens by adoption, though, you must admit, my Persian accent isn't as noticeable as your South American one."

"That doesn't take away any of his privilege," Anaïs cut in, her hand seeking mine across the table.

"I think you're all giving Whitney far too much importance," Petra cut in. "That poor woman is already retired, and she's kindly agreed to come teach these young people."

"Let her do it without lying, then," Parvaneh exclaimed. "She claims she headed an Anthropology Department in the United States for eighteen years, and, as far as we could find out, her Bible Belt university only has a specialization, not a full program, in anthropology."

"Aren't you being a bit provocative?" Petra asked.

Parvaneh looked at her with an incredulous smile, as though Petra had just claimed the sky was green.

"I mean," Petra explained, uncomfortable, "because I was once told you challenged Whitney in front of the whole faculty, objecting that her classes lacked any theoretical grounding."

"To which she replied," Parvaneh smiled, disenchanted, her impersonation of Whitney cruelly precise, "with a sour look, that her course was designed as a workshop, and before I could point out that every workshop requires a theoretical component, she turned her

face sharply and, plastering an ear-to-ear Felix the Cat grin on her face, snapped: ‘Any other questions I have to refute?’”

The silence that followed was comfortable. We all knew who she meant, we had all endured something similar.

It was then that Derogan, with the abruptness of someone changing the subject because the previous one wasn’t proving profitable, turned to me with a challenging look.

“So you’re a great reader of Shakespeare?”

The question caught me off guard. A few days earlier, someone on an internet forum had posted some lines without attribution, asking which author and which work they were from. I had recognized them at once: it was Henry V’s speech before the Battle of Agincourt, that marvel of rhetoric in which the king turns his army’s numerical inferiority into an emotional advantage, a brotherhood forged on the eve of battle. I had written the identification in the thread without thinking that small note would travel much further. Evidently it had reached Derogan.

“I’d like to be one,” I said, with the modesty of someone approaching a subject he loves but knows will be challenged.

“Not me,” he snapped. “In fact, I think all his literature is presumptuous rhetoric. I don’t understand a single one of his lines, starting with that ‘to be or not to be’ one. And that King Henry speech you identified online: who does that serve today? A battle-eve pep talk that no one even remembers anymore.”

I watched him with a mix of surprise and something I’d rather not call contempt. Derogan had that particular quality of someone who reduces all value to immediate usefulness: poetry was expendable entertainment, history a ledger of expenses no one was

ever going to audit. His face showed no doubt, only the certainty of Aesop’s presumptuous fox, who believes the world is divided between what her body can reach and what her limited abilities can no longer manage.

“That very speech,” I answered, weighing my words so they’d land as a dart, not a dagger, “is a masterclass on how to convince men to die for something with no economic benefit to them. If Henry V had done the math you’re proposing, he’d have turned back at Calais. Instead, he offered them something with no market price: the certainty that they would be remembered. ‘We few, we happy few, we band of brothers.’ It worked. They won.”

“To which Shakespeare,” Parvaneh cut in, smiling, “would add that the dead never collect their share of the glory.”

“To which Shakespeare would add exactly that,” I agreed. “That’s his greatness: he doesn’t hide the trap. He puts it on full display, and you still fall for it.”

“You’ll call me an ignoramus, but Shakespeare matters to me about as much as a thimble.”

“Beckett’s line about Proust applies to you,” I replied, weighing my words so they’d land as a dart, not a dagger. “If you, ladies and gentlemen, don’t understand his work, it’s because you’re simply too ignorant, and decadent, to receive it.”

Derogan fell silent, unable to counter me. His jaw tensed, and for an instant I thought he might get up from the table. He didn’t. Parvaneh came to his rescue like someone slapping a bandage on an infected wound:

“In English we don’t use that phrasing. We say they’re ignorant, or that they’re decadent.”

“I said it for emphasis,” I conceded, amid Derogan’s laughter, remembering that, indeed, Beckett had only used the word “decadent.”

Derogan roared with laughter at my answer, as though that tiny linguistic correction had nullified my entire argument.

"It's best to stick to the truth when correcting an uncultured American," Parvaneh whispered in my ear, and there was a complicity in her tone against Derogan's laughter.

"An Indian-American," I corrected, dropping the subject.

Anaïs cut in then, with that intuition she had for knowing exactly when I was about to say something I'd regret, and steered the conversation toward the topic of women's safety in Kyrgyzstan.

"Is it true a student's sister was kidnapped?"

"Not only that," Parvaneh said, her voice turning grave, as though sharing a state secret. "She's a student of mine and told me everything: she drowned in the river, and they filmed the scene for a documentary."

"It's a local tradition," Derogan said, shrugging. "I'm told that way the family saves on wedding costs. It's understandable: a ceremony here costs six months' salary."

"The problem is the girl has no say in who kidnaps her," Parvaneh snapped, "and he rapes her, then forces her to marry him."

"Besides," Derogan said, no doubt retaliating for the remark Parvaneh had whispered to me a bit too audibly, "how does a woman go around alone like that in the first place? In India they'd see her and simply gang-rape her, and no one would ever dare marry her afterward; women like that have no choice but to kill themselves for honor's sake. It's inefficient for everyone. For the family, for the State, for the husband who might otherwise have existed."

The silence that followed was thick. Derogan smiled, satisfied, as though he'd just proven an equation. There was no calculated cruelty on his face, which was worse: it was the calm of someone who had turned horror into bookkeeping.

Petra looked at him strangely, wanting to distance

herself with a timid frown of reproach.

"What strikes me is how many beggars there are in the streets," she said at last, showing, as was already her habit, her scant interest in other people's conflicts.

I wondered whether Derogan's infamous remark had been cooked up between the two of them. Like Michelle, Anaïs's mother, she had that terrible quality some French women share: using their lovers as mouthpieces for their cruelest opinions.

"Since the Muslim religion requires giving alms," I said, returning to the subject with a touch of irony, "it's understandable there are so many."

"I only give alms once a week," Petra said, "and I give a two-hundred-som note. What good does it do them to receive coins?"

"Do you enjoy the beggars' looks of astonishment so much?" Parvaneh snapped.

"Perhaps," Petra nodded, straining to ignore her sarcasm. "Last week the man I rewarded opened his eyes wide, hid the bill in his pocket, and took off running down the street."

We all laughed, but it was an uneasy laugh, the kind of laugh where you're not quite sure whether you're laughing at the anecdote, or at the person telling it.

Bishkek, September 21, 2002

That afternoon, Arkadina told me the University was furious over the template letter for requesting CASE funds, which I had drafted and sent to all faculty the previous Saturday. The problem wasn't the content, but the fictional character I had chosen as the example: a student named Zernebog Dostoevsky, requesting a monthly hundred-dollar emergency stipend for meals, arguing that his scholarship obligations left him no time for a job.

Arkadina told me she knew of only one Zernebog in the entire city, and that it happened to be precisely the

student who took my classes. I explained that I'd thought such an original name was common in the region, to which she indicated, impatiently, that Zernebog was not a student currently in need of any stipend, since he had been the host of a local television program for three years.

"Wasn't he studying at Iowa University?" I asked.

"That scholarship was for being one of the top students in his class."

"Strange," I answered, "because he hasn't been to my classes since the second week."

Arkadina's jaw muscles worked as she held back her anger. I understood that, without meaning to, I had sent what could be read as an exposé of the network of favoritism running through the University, in which students with limited resources were the ones with the fewest options, while those with money and connections had every advantage.

Zernebog Dostoevsky, television host, did not need an emergency scholarship. But there were others, many others, who did. And the template letter I had written, without knowing it, had laid bare that uncomfortable truth.

"Fine," I nodded, without knowing exactly what I was agreeing to.

"I need a public apology," Arkadina snapped, clasping her hands together as though strangling someone invisible.

"I'll send an email right now," I nodded.

I drafted an apology explaining that I hadn't known "Zernebog" was such an exclusive name in the city, and attached a new letter using the name "Fyodor" instead.

"Fyodor Dostoevsky?" Arkadina asked, with a hint of disbelief, upon receiving my email.

"I hope we don't have another homonym on the faculty," I nodded, with a smile she couldn't quite read.

"I'd have preferred a name that was more..."

"Oriental?" I asked, and, exposing the deepest local prejudice, added, "How about Hun-Sue?"

"Let's just leave it," she told me, a growing flush on her cheeks.

I gathered she was already aware of my exchange with the Chinese student. The informant network was working; nothing escaped their ears.

"Tomorrow I'm traveling to Budapest to meet with the director of the SEP organization," she told me, her expression tense, as though bracing for a question I shouldn't be asking.

"Excellent!" I replied, calmly. "Who will be in charge of the Faculty?"

My question rattled her for a moment. Her fingers fiddled with the edge of the folder.

"Me," she answered, with a hesitation I'd never heard from her before. "Who else? In case of emergency you can speak with my secretary, Saikal."

"Let's hope the students don't write another letter against me this week," I joked.

Arkadina sighed impatiently and left without looking at me. Her back, as she walked away down the hallway, was a coded message that would reveal itself later.

Bishkek, September 28, 2002

I considered the advantages of working with SEP, accepting its pyramidal structure. Despite our apartment's poor condition, we couldn't complain about its location. All the embassy buildings and NGOs are within short walking distance.

In the calm God has granted me, where silence becomes a companion to my pen and time folds back on itself to let me turn what I've lived into a novel, I return, again and again, to that walk home. It was the hour when the sun begins its long farewell, and I made my way down Erkindik Avenue as one crossing a tunnel of gold and fire. The oaks and chestnuts, tall and ancient, sang the language

of autumn and translated it into a slow rain of dry leaves falling at my feet with the tenderness of rose petals, as though the sky itself had chosen, in that instant, to celebrate my silent stubbornness, my titan's obstinacy against the lies and corruption with which that society sought to pierce me as they once pierced Saint Sebastian the martyr. Beyond, the light filtered through that reddish and yellow foliage, scattering into a thousand golden fragments, weaving with every step a new, unprecedented range of light dazzling the path, delighting the eye with a lyrical language only poets devoted to the divine can perceive.

In the mornings, going out, I also walk in a kind of rapture, slowly, bearing my illness, toward a radiant sun that bathes me in its splendor. Vladimir has noticed this and waits for me in his Soviet Lada outside my residential complex. I would rather walk, but my weakness forces me to accept his offer. I ask him to take the longer route around the park, and we talk casually about the news while I watch the treetops hide and reveal the sun. I pay him twenty soms—that is, one dollar—for a five-minute ride, which, I've been told, is a fortune here.

Despite resenting his eleven threadbare rugs, our landlord left us a large number of Russian books and, as I've already written, an out-of-tune piano. Since knowledge has been the main incentive for this journey, I continue my studies with dedication, neglecting, according to Anaïs, my health.

There's a gym on the ground floor where I've enrolled her; she says it's uncomfortable, a reasonable-sounding argument I've since used to justify giving it up myself, which doesn't stop her—oh, feminine paradox—from going every morning to pedal the stationary bike, watching Chuy Avenue through a fogged-up window. The monthly fee is fifty dollars, a considerable sum in this region, and I often wonder why she stayed quiet when

Whitney hinted it was suspicious that I claimed our modest income barely covered our monthly expenses.

I clean the apartment three times a week, since dust from the avenue keeps drifting in every morning.

On my way home, the phone rang. It was six in the evening. Anaïs was in the shower. I picked up.

"Marco Saint-André?" A woman's voice, low, with that flat tone used by those who want to be recognized without being identified.

"Yes."

"Your wife spent three hours talking with Edward yesterday, at the University café."

The blow landed cleanly. Not because of the content—it wasn't the first time someone had tried to sow discord between us—but because of its tone and its precision: three hours, the University café, yesterday.

"Who is this?"

The click of the hang-up was her only answer.

I stood there, receiver in hand, listening to the intermittent dial tone. My mind ran in every possible direction. First: was it true? Had Anaïs spent three hours with Edward without telling me? Second: if it was true, why hadn't she told me? Third: if it wasn't true, who was lying, and why?

I ruled out the possibility of it being a joke. There were no jokes in Bishkek; everything was a matter of life and death.

I thought of Magda, her low voice, her cutting accent, her barely disguised hatred of me since the first faculty meeting. She had the contacts, the means, the motives. I also thought of Dorothy, but Dorothy had already left for Cambridge—or so I believed—and her poison was more intellectual, less domestic; I thought of Arkadina, of Annula, of anyone who might have seen Anaïs with Edward and decided it would drive a wedge between us.

I was even more unsettled by the thought that

whoever had called wasn't trying to hurt me, but Anaïs, a prey, according to the most widespread stereotypes of Latin Americans, to a jealousy as harmful as Othello's.

That an anonymous voice would want to put her in an uncomfortable position with me, would want me to doubt her, to watch her, to control her, was reason enough to condemn it. And it took only a pinch of common sense to know that this invisible network of informants, which didn't attack directly but sowed marital distrust instead, was the very same network that had been spying on me since my arrival, under Magda's direction.

In Bishkek, a foreign academic's first line of defense wasn't his résumé, but the solidity of his household; if they could get us to turn on each other, we'd be more vulnerable; if they could get us to separate, we'd be at their mercy.

I sat down in the kitchen and waited for Anaïs to come out of the shower. I knew I had to ask, but I also knew that if I asked in the wrong tone, the anonymous call would have accomplished exactly what it set out to do.

"Is something wrong?" she asked, seeing me, her hair still wet, a towel over her shoulders.

"Nothing," I lied.

We ate dinner in silence. She told me about her statistics class, about a student who'd handed in an assignment with hand-drawn charts, about the monotony of the syllabi. I nodded without listening. The anonymous voice kept running through my head: three hours... three hours...

Finally, when she got up to clear the plates, I spoke.

"Anaïs."

"Yes?"

"Were you at the University café yesterday?"

She set the plates in the sink and turned to face me. Her expression carried both guilt and surprise.

"Yes," she said. "I ran into Edward, the banker.

We mostly talked about him; he wanted to tell me about his new partner."

"For how long?"

"I don't know... an hour, maybe two."

"Three," I said, and my voice came out sharper than I wanted. "Like in Clarín's *La Regenta*, your colleagues and professors measure the length of their friendly encounters."

Anaïs frowned. She rested her hands on the table and looked at me with that calm that appeared whenever I was about to do something foolish.

"Who told you that?"

"I got a call; a woman. She didn't identify herself."

"And you believed her?"

"I didn't say I believed her," I lied again, because yes, in some corner of my mind, I had.

Anaïs sat across from me. She took my hands in hers; they were cold, as they always were when she came back from the gym.

"Edward is an older man," she said. "He's boring, honestly. We talked about his bank, his kids, his divorce. Nothing more. I don't know who called you or why, but what they're after is exactly this: for you to doubt me. For you to control me with unnecessary, annoying questions, for us to fight. Do you see it?"

"I see it," I said, and it was true.

Even so, seeing it didn't erase the discomfort.

"So then," she let go of my hands and stood up, "trust me."

She went to the bedroom. I stayed in the kitchen, staring at the sink, the unwashed dishes, the yellow lamplight flickering as though it, too, or perhaps I, were doubting something.

I slept badly that night, despite the Antigrippin I'd taken. The anonymous call mixed itself with the providential dream of the lemon squeezed from the sky, with the sensation of falling from a hundred-meter diving

board without knowing whether there would be water at the bottom.

At dawn I remembered having dreamed of a Polyphemus with effeminate Asian faces and blonde hair, who had wrapped me in white silk threads, binding me like a shroud alongside other foreigners, all already drained like flowers that had given up their nectar, on the shelves lining the walls of his immense cave, like a pantry. In the reflection of waking, I saw myself caught in a web of complicities that was not only that of my colleagues, with their academic favoritism, nor of the badly awarded scholarships, nor of the well-connected students; it was chiefly that of the anonymous informants, of the half-truths, of the glances exchanged in hallways that later turned into phone calls. Everyone was connected by their former work as KGB spies, everyone watched everyone else, ready to destroy the most fragile thing of all, our marital bond, in order to suck out whatever was left of me.

Bishkek, September 29, 2002

On Friday we had the luncheon with nearly fifty colleagues from other universities; that's how we learned that for every international faculty member SEP brought in, ten local professors benefited from monthly stipends. Beside me I recognized Dr. Anton Utkin among the crowd; his broad smile beneath his long hair and thick white beard reminded me of a lion's jaws, dressed in a silk suit and jacket, stalking his prey from a circus cage.

The lunch was varied and abundant, a dozen dishes from various regions of Central Asia. Menrik, a thin professor with bulging eyes from the University of Central Asia, dressed in a newly bought blue suit, stood up and, echoing the same speech from the opening session, offered a toast to George Soros, the philanthropist who, he insisted, had brought the region's finest dishes back to our table.

Since I don't drink alcohol during the day, I set my wine glass aside and asked for a glass of prune juice.

"You must toast," Utkin told me, handing me another glass of sparkling wine. "If you don't, the locals will be offended."

I accepted with a smile, but, instead of his glass, I recovered my own with an evasive gesture. I found the wine too sweet, and, fearing it might turn sour, I downed it in one gulp, shaking off the inquisitive looks studying me.

Then a debate began over whether prostitution should be legalized. I chose to stay silent before the prevailing opinion in favor of legalizing human trafficking. Then I saw Menrik rise from his chair and point at me with a wave of his hand.

"Is it true you're Colombian?" he asked me.

"That's right," I nodded, as a murmur ran through the table like a wave.

"What's the minimum wage in your country?"

I did the conversion from pesos to dollars in my head.

"Three hundred dollars," I answered. "Maybe a bit more."

"Impossible!" a ruddy, red-haired woman who hadn't opened her mouth the entire meal exclaimed. "You're lying!"

"And why would he lie?" Anaïs murmured beside me, her hand covering mine on the table.

"There goes his beloved Frenchwoman, defending him!" Utkin laughed, and his laughter was echoed by others.

"But in Turkey," Menrik said, eyes wide, as though he'd just discovered the world wasn't what he'd been taught, "the minimum wage is a hundred dollars. And Turkey is a world power!"

"Perhaps an economist could clarify that for us," I answered, feeling a growing nausea at speaking up, at once again puncturing that bubble of ignorance they lived in, fed

by the silence of so many Colombians who had arrived on scholarships during the Stalinist era. "I know that here the minimum wage is barely five dollars. A real shame. That's why, I believe, there's so much corruption in the teaching system."

The word "corruption" landed on the table like a grenade. Faces tensed. Someone let out a loud sneeze; it was Utkin, whose smile vanished as a result.

"Corruption is common to every developing country," Utkin cut in, in a tone meant to sound conciliatory but was, in fact, a warning. "Or are you going to tell us there's no corruption in Colombia, a nation that, according to its own contemporaries, is dominated by fifty capitalist families?"

"Not as much corruption as here," I replied, under a growing sense of drunkenness. The sparkling wine was going to everyone's head with a speed I could already read in their hostile stares. "But perhaps there will be, the day we have a socialist government. Because socialism, as you all lived it, according to the texts I've been reading these days, was the open door to the corruption that produced the collapse of the Soviet Union."

Anaïs smiled proudly, urging me to keep going with a speech I had already crossed the Rubicon with. Her hand lifted her glass like a message in Morse code: speak, teach them, instruct them.

"Your thesis is so novel!" Menrik's voice, punctuated by his ironic applause, cracked into a shrill note reminiscent of nails on a chalkboard. "So you, coming from the jungle, believe that with your travels through the United States, Portugal, and England, you can teach us a history we've already lived?"

The whole table held its breath before my calm expression. The ruddy, red-haired woman now stared at her plate as though the fate of dinner itself hinged on it. Only Anaïs drank, unruffled, from her raised glass.

"I haven't come to give lessons," I answered, feeling the nausea give way to an inspired clarity. "But to understand; I understand that socialism also left some good things behind, and that many of you never truly wanted independence from mother Russia."

A murmur of indignation spread at my mention of the taboo subject, untouched since the 1991 independence.

Utkin drained his glass and wiped his lips with his napkin, slowly, like someone sharpening a knife.

"You think like the generous Americans who fund these dinners and conferences," he said, savoring almost every syllable with pleasure. "And you speak like those Russian journalists who accuse us of nationalism, simply because we cherish our epic poem, the *Manas*, and want everyone in this city to study Kyrgyz. I suppose you don't know what I'm referring to."

"On the contrary!" I answered. "I've hired private lessons with Professor Lyudmila."

Another murmur of disbelief spread among those present.

"Don't you dare call us failures. Do you know how much I earned in 1989, in Moscow? Ninety rubles a month, and it was enough to eat, to go to the theater, to live with dignity with my wife and two children. And now, our three-hundred-dollar salary, Mr. Colombia, in American money, is it enough for us? No! It's not enough! But let it be noted, we are grateful for it. A toast to your beautiful French wife!"

A murmur of laughter and approval swept the table. We all toasted to Anaïs, who obligingly answered the questions of professors fascinated by our story.

"I wonder why you all," I said, feeling at last that I fit in with everyone, as Utkin poured me more wine, "you who had an empire, are now debating whether to legalize human trafficking, while drinking French wine in a restaurant that used to belong to the Party."

"Dignity," Utkin said, "isn't measured in rubles or

dollars. It's measured by how many uncomfortable questions we're willing to tolerate from a foreigner before asking for the check."

We laughed, though I was unable to understand his joke. Menrik, still watching me, drained his glass in a single gulp and, for the first time all evening, smiled at me as though I were his closest friend.

The ruddy woman, who minutes earlier had accused me of lying, now sat squinting beside me, telling me about her trip to Guatemala years before, quoting bits of Spanish.

Menrik got up again and, tapping his glass with his teaspoon, called for silence to make a toast.

"This is the hospitable spirit of Kyrgyzstan!" he said, and his words fell on the table like gold coins. "We are not patient in everything, but we are in what matters. We've turned nostalgia into a trench, and that trench into a port where every nation arrives, even those who were once our enemies: the United States, the capitalist Colombia our guerrilla comrades fought and could not defeat, and the France of De Gaulle!"

Everyone toasted as though it had been Martin Luther King's finest speech in D.C. Anaïs took back her hand and set it on mine again.

"It seems this professor has caught your bluntness."

"In vino veritas," I nodded.

"So then," Utkin cut in, "shall we save the debate over prostitution for another night?"

General laughter.

"Because it seems to me the real debate isn't whether to legalize it or not, but why, in this room, after everything all of you have lived through, the only one who seems willing to face our history is a Colombian who insists that in his Amazonian nation the minimum wage is three hundred dollars a month."

We all laughed; they, because they didn't believe me, and I, because I was telling the truth—an agreement that elegantly smoothed over our differences.

Suddenly I felt a stab in my stomach and stumbled off to the bathroom. I vomited loudly into the toilet, as though my body were expelling not only the alcohol but some deadly poison. I wondered whether I'd been drugged; I'd seen at least four different bottles pouring into my glass over the last few minutes.

Coming out, I found Utkin waiting for me by the sink, hands crossed over his chest, a small notebook open in the breast pocket of his jacket; I noticed it was identical to the one Arkadina used.

"But tell us about your life," he said, washing his hands with deliberate slowness. "We know you've received scholarships in several countries. Impressive. How did your journey lead you to this corner of the world?"

"Two years ago," I said, leaning against the cold tiled wall, "I had a good job in Porto, where I lived with Anaïs, or so I believed. One night, in mid-July, I found her crying in her room, in front of one of the most beautiful rivers I've ever known: the Douro, the river of gold. When I asked her the reason for her sorrow, she answered that she couldn't bear her life as a housewife, and that I was the cause of her troubles. I accepted her reproach as penance, sacrificing my own wellbeing for hers..."

I talked for a long time; caught in that delirium only psychotropic substances can produce, I told him my whole saga in Philadelphia, my guilt, the prayer in the Nevada desert, the Virgin Mary, Portugal, Manchester. As I spoke, I saw Utkin taking notes in his little notebook; he wrote quickly, in pencil, as though afraid my confessions might slip away from him.

"...And so I took up the habit of praying the rosary every night, right before falling asleep, and then, on one occasion, I was separated from myself. I rose in the certainty that I could advance toward a better life, for an

overwhelming feeling drew me toward a source of radiant love. I believed I had reached heaven upon arriving, but then discovered, to my surprise, that I had only conquered a grain of sand on earth, and that this earth was, I understood clearly, merely a single planet in the infinite universe. Death revealed itself as the sweetest state I could aspire to, after so much suffering and forgiveness. I saw my past, free of guilt, and decided to die—that is, to contemplate forever the blessings of that unconquerable light, whose mere memory outweighs every pleasure of this world. I blush to speak of pleasures, since these are fleeting, whereas that feeling was full and unceasing. And then I sensed that this generous light, which you have surely identified as God, was calling me. But it was neither a voice nor a sound, only a gentle, all-understanding feeling that sang. I felt compelled to turn my eyes away and look around me. What did I see? A group of victims of immense pain, lost in a labyrinth of ignorance or confusion. The light shone before them, and yet they avoided it as one avoids the light of the sun. So distracted were they in the shadows! It was as though they had no time for the light.

“‘Would you like to help them?’ I heard myself being asked.

“‘Yes!’ I answered at once, spurred on by the compassion I felt for those poor creatures.

“It was too hard to watch them suffer, and there was so much happiness I could have shared. And then, how can I explain it, I felt myself being pulled away from the light. All my happiness vanished in an instant, and I began to cry, ‘No! No! No!’ tears in my eyes, feeling once again the pain of birth, the tribulations of survival, and the weight of loneliness—that same loneliness Misha felt when she told me it was professors from my own university, two older men, mustached, who most often paid her for the same favors other students shared...”

Utkin had stopped writing. His pencil hung

suspended over the notebook, and his eyes—mocking before, now serious—studied me with an intensity that unsettled me.

“Did you wake up?” he asked.

“In the middle of the night, beside Anaïs, still unable to understand the nature of that vision, or dream.”

Utkin nodded slowly. He closed the notebook and put it away in his jacket’s inner pocket. Then he stepped up to the mirror, adjusted the knot of his tie, and said:

“You will forget everything we’ve discussed.”

And he shut himself in a toilet stall.

I stayed alone in the bathroom, listening to the murmur of water running through the pipes. Had he meant to hypnotize me? Without a doubt, but I remained aware of what was happening.

I felt the vertigo again, and an inner voice told me:

You passed the test, rejoice: they’ve seen you come to them without ill intentions.

I had handed over a story I had never meant to give to a man who was not my confidant. Why had I told him all of that? Why had I bared myself before him? The wine, I thought, and also that innate need to be heard. I had just confessed myself to a stranger, more fully than I would ever have done with my own priest.

Coming out of the bathroom, Anaïs was waiting for me, her face full of worry; the tables were empty, the tablecloths dirty, the waiters stacking chairs.

“What happened?” she asked me. “Everyone’s already gone.”

“I think I drank too much,” I told her, before taking her hand.

We walked toward the exit without speaking. Outside, the afternoon sun struck us like a rebuke.

“Who were you with in the bathroom?” Anaïs asked, as we waited for a taxi.

“Utkin.”

“The doctor?”

“The very same.”

“What did he want?”

I didn’t know how to answer. What did Utkin want? Information? Complicity? A story he could use against me? No doubt, exactly what I had been announcing since my arrival: the truth, in the midst of so many lies.

16. Cinema and Perception

To be immortal is trivial; except for man, all creatures are, for they know nothing of death

J. L. Borges

Bishkek, September 29, 2002

Today, coming out of Mass, Father Hans and the nuns invited us all to lunch on Thursday at the rectory, so we could meet the parish’s second priest, Father Peter, who is returning from a retreat in Rome. I accepted gladly. In church, at least, I thought, the webs of complicity are well-intentioned.

It was only months later that I would understand that both Hans and the nuns had seen in Anaïs and me potential candidates for a religious vocation. Their hope had formed around the assumption that a Frenchwoman doesn’t simply marry a Colombian to go live with him in Bishkek, and it dissolved when Whitney, to their evident shock, clarified that we were husband and wife, married in the Catholic Church, in a chapel in Cheshire, England.

Bishkek, September 30, 2002

Having recovered from the hangover brought on by Dr. Utkin’s cocktails, we got a call from Narguiza, who secured us box seats at the Abdylas Maldybaev National Opera and Ballet Theater of Kyrgyzstan for the premiere of *Madame Butterfly*. A single phone call from one of Narguiza’s relatives was enough to secure as many seats as we needed. I wasn’t surprised that Petra, Derogan, and Venkatesh sent their regrets, but I was surprised that Whitney refused to join us the moment she learned Parvaneh would be coming along. The rift between the two of them had become unbridgeable.

The opera opened with old, traditional-style

curtains; we were watching a Soviet-era production, and I found myself transported back to that time when men believed it was enough to issue orders in the people's name for everyone to carry out their tasks flawlessly. Beside me, Parvaneh let out an almost imperceptible moan that made me glance at her sideways. Thick tears rolled down her cheeks as she listened to the aria "Vogliatemi bene," right at the end of the first act. During the interlude, Anaïs stood and applauded the star singer.

"Go meet her," I suggested.

"Can I do that?" she asked, with that same insecurity I always cured with a word or a gesture.

"There's no law against going to her dressing room," I said, glad to break through the imaginary lines habit or upbringing impose on so many people I've known throughout my life. "Tell her you're from France."

"Let's go together," Narguiza suggested, behind her.

After a brief hesitation, Anaïs rose from her seat and went off to the dressing rooms. I asked Parvaneh, meanwhile, about her love of Puccini.

"It's the tragedy of a woman mistreated by an inhumane, patriarchal system," she sighed, her fingers toying with the edge of the program as though it were a rosary.

"Are you speaking from experience?" I dared to ask.

Parvaneh let out one of those laughs of assent only the British truly understand: dry, brief, joyless.

"It's easy for you to ask," she told me. "You're in a country where every man lives freely, plucking whatever flower he wants. Last night I was at the Hyatt Hotel, and do you know who I saw? Sixty-something University President Daniel Weiler and his young mistress Annika, a student barely twenty years old. Daniel is so arrogant that when I asked whether it wasn't hard to sustain a

relationship with a teenager, he told me that all across Asia, women prefer older men."

"That's true," I nodded, knowing full well my honesty might irritate her. "I've read that in Vietnam and Thailand, girls are taught that older men give the women they love what a beardless young man cannot offer with the same stability: financial security, respect in society, and fidelity. Desire, after all, is shaped by the alter ego—that is, by what a child hears from admired teachers, whether those are parents or, as happens in the West, television and the press."

"So you're saying you don't provide Anaïs with financial security?" she scoffed, and, without waiting for my answer, added, "At least you'll give her fidelity."

"Do you have a boyfriend?" I asked, not daring to ask whether she thought my social standing wasn't respectable enough for my wife.

Parvaneh blushed, a flush that rose from her neck to her cheeks within seconds.

"He's in Germany," she said, smoothing her hair with a nervous gesture. "A separated man."

"Older than you?"

"I see where this is going," she smiled, but it was a sad smile. "Werner is twenty years older than me. But Annika is fifty years younger than Daniel. There are differences."

Anaïs came back and told me they hadn't let her near the diva's dressing room.

"She doesn't want to be interrupted while she's in the zone," Narguiza explained, somewhat embarrassed, as though the diva were a relative of hers and she were apologizing on her behalf.

"We'll see her at the end," I reassured them.

The second act began—it was the original 1904 version, with its uncompromising tragic ending—and the opera unfolded flawlessly. I must confess the Bishkek Philharmonic Orchestra's performance improved, in my

opinion, thanks to Dorothy's timely departure.

Damira played first violin with great skill, her bow seeming to float over the strings like a feather on the air.

On the way out, Parvaneh invited us for a glass of wine at her apartment. We accepted, and discovered we were practically neighbors; her building stood on the block facing ours, across a vacant lot. We entered a spacious reception hall decorated with mirrors and sofas, and from there she led us up a generously lit staircase to the fourth floor, into an apartment with soaring walls decorated with original paintings by local artists that, she explained, she had bought within a week of arriving.

Her immaculate rugs, her plush sofas, and the wide terrace off her living room, with its view over the city, made me question the stoicism with which Anaïs and I had accepted our dusty apartment on Chuy Avenue.

"It was the best I could find in the city," she sighed, uncorking a bottle of Merlot. "I know this part of the world, and I wasn't going to let them stick me with an apartment at half the budgeted price."

"You mean..." Anaïs hesitated, mouth open in a show of premeditated surprise.

"Mirbek is a nice enough boy," Parvaneh went on, pouring the wine into glasses that clinked softly, "but that candid look of his doesn't fool me. He's the one who arranges every apartment lease for the year. You can just imagine the commissions he pockets."

"Maybe we could switch ours," Anaïs said.

I nodded, without much enthusiasm. After the snub over the Mongolia conference, I felt weary of contacting Darixa for favors. Besides, no other apartment had as many books available as ours, or a private piano. The dust, I thought, was a small price to pay for Russian literature and an out-of-tune keyboard.

After two bottles, Parvaneh told us she had traveled from London not only to study the cultures tied

to her Persian and Turkish past, but also to get away from Werner, with whom she had carried on a nearly ten-year relationship.

"We have three children," she said, quoting her tormenting lover, "is his eternal excuse, 'who would never forgive me for dragging their mother to court over infidelity'—because, yes, according to him, he left her for being unfaithful with a Romanian."

"There are other men here," I said.

Parvaneh laughed with a pathetic cheerfulness.

"I gave that man the spring of my mature years," she moaned, with a sadness that made me think of the verses of the Afghan poet Rabia Balkhi, the very ones she herself had translated into English, and which she now recited quietly, like a prayer: that love is like a shoreless ocean, and who can sail upon it.

On our way home, I remarked to Anaïs on her identification with the story of *Madame Butterfly*.

"Despite her age," I told her, "Parvaneh fears being just one more butterfly, pinned beside the nightstand of her Teutonic gentleman."

Anaïs answered with a psychological analysis of Parvaneh, predicting that we would soon see her caught up in a heated romance with some Kyrgyz professor or bureaucrat of Russian descent.

She held me close, and we walked in silence beneath the acacias of Chuy Avenue, while the autumn sun filtered through the leaves, casting our joined shadow across a city that kept revealing to us its darkest paths.

We played cards and shared a dinner of cheese and French bread; turning off the light, Anaïs noticed my drawn expression and asked what was troubling me.

"The network," I said.

"What network?"

"The one that reported you, and refuses to identify itself."

Anaïs sat up in bed. Her silhouette against the

window was little more than a shadow.

"If we trust each other," she said, stroking my hair, "the way those who love each other truly do, that network doesn't matter."

I nodded, laughing in a show of complicity, kissed her, and, holding each other, we shared that slow, deep breathing only spouses know.

Bishkek, October 1, 2002

Yesterday I invited José to lunch at the Turkish restaurant, since Anaïs had classes until two in the afternoon. Casting nervous glances around him, my Cuban friend first told me about the unpleasant experience suffered by Álvaro Petro, a fellow countryman of his who had lived in Kyrgyzstan for nearly eleven years.

"Some of the locals hate us," he began, "but until now they had respected us. Yesterday, at five in the morning, I got a call from Álvaro. He could barely speak. He asked me to pick him up outside a Chinese restaurant on the edge of the city. I went with Tomás, my oldest boy, and found him unconscious in a pool of blood. He had wounds and bruises all over his body. We took him to the hospital, where they almost turned him away, assuming he was some kind of criminal. Luckily, Tatiana had a cousin who worked there. She called her, and we managed to get him admitted. That night he woke up and told me everything: he was on his way to my office to visit me when three guards stopped him and demanded his papers. He showed them his citizenship card and his Bishkek work permit, but one of the guards claimed they were fake. They ignored his protests and handcuffed him. They took him in a van to the outskirts of the city, where they beat and kicked him for nearly fifteen minutes. He told me, between groans, that they repeated, hundreds of times, that this is how every Cuban who meddles in Kyrgyz affairs should be treated."

I noticed a slight tremor in his hands. Álvaro, he added, had never spoken ill of the country.

"And the police?" I asked.

José let out a bitter laugh.

"Investigate? Around here, the police are the ones doing the beating."

He stared at me. His eyes, warm until then, were now two stones.

"Because you're also a foreigner," he said.

"Because you have an accent that isn't from here. He survived. Others haven't been so lucky."

He told me then about the scandal from the previous semester: Valentino, an American professor of Cuban descent, had carried on an affair with one of his young students. Leo—the name chilled my blood, since I thought of the diligent student who took notes with such monastic devotion—had seduced him and then reported him to the authorities. The University president had to intervene to keep the newspapers from splashing the scandal across their front pages. Bribes, he said, had reached ten thousand dollars.

"And Valentino?"

"He disappeared. Some say SEP repatriated him with a severance package. Others say he's in prison. No one knows for certain."

Only then did I understand that the beating of the Cuban, real or not, was a warning directed at me. José was an employee of the American University, a position that, like every post from the Soviet era, demanded unconditional loyalty to one's superiors. And Arkadina Morozov, with her intelligence contacts, could make an inconvenient foreigner disappear as easily as one wipes a chalkboard clean.

José nodded, paid his share of the bill, and said goodbye with a hug that lasted a second longer than usual. Then, as though picking up a lost thread, he added:

"If Fidel had been consistent with his ideals, they'd

have already overthrown him, and Cuba would be the paradise it stopped being: the Americans' vacation island. What we suffer instead is a petty king who thinks himself a little god. As Lezama Lima wrote, only kings feel the desire to rebel against gods and titans."

I recognized the line: it was José Lezama Lima's, the Cuban novelist who endured socialism's decline until he died of sorrow.

"He opposed the Catholic Church," José went on, as though reciting a litany, "and the moment John Paul II announced he would visit Cuba, he declared Catholicism the Revolution's official religion. He proclaimed drugs the decadence of the United States and turned his island into the required stop for every cocaine shipment, but the moment he was implicated, he claimed to know nothing about it and put four military officers on trial who had served him with dog-like loyalty."

"And how did he reward them?"

"By having them shot," José said, his voice breaking. "That's when Susan Sontag asked García Márquez to abandon his complicity with Fidel's tyranny and intervene to save those poor men's lives. García Márquez, of course, never confronted the boss of the Latin American intelligentsia who handed him the Nobel—an intelligentsia made up mostly of writers and university professors who pay Fidel a tribute worthy of National Socialism. One day he persecutes homosexuals, egged on by Che Guevara, and the moment the European Union questions him, he imposes LGBT teaching in every school and orders his police to allow homosexual prostitution between locals and foreigners."

"Fidel is an opportunist," I said. "He reminds me of Odysseus, who, the more of a liar and a trickster he was, the more the Greeks admired him. Only Fidel knew how to manipulate the Cold War to remain the true King of Latin America. What that shows is just how empty our

countries' politics really are."

"Anaïs and I would like to invite you two to dinner at a nice restaurant," I added, changing the subject. I had already heard enough.

Bishkek, October 2, 2002

Today, walking into the Faculty office, I found the entire teaching staff waiting, led by Arkadina. Everyone had their arms crossed, like in one of those Soviet trial films where the accused has already been condemned before he speaks. I immediately sensed I was about to be held to account for something I had said or done.

"We've discovered, Mr. Saint-André," Saikal said sternly, "that your file is missing photocopies of your university degrees."

I smiled, relieved. Just bureaucracy.

"I'll gladly email you scans as soon as I get home," I answered.

"I'm afraid that won't be enough," said Magda, eyes ablaze. "We already have those scans from SEP. What we need is to see the original copies."

I studied them for a few moments that revealed their treachery. They were hoping I hadn't brought the original copies, and would therefore be unable to present them.

"I promise to bring them this week," I answered. "Since we're speaking, I'd like to ask about the procedure for borrowing the video equipment for three days."

"I'm afraid we can't help you with that," Saikal answered. "The equipment falls under the University president's authority, since it's often used to record his speeches."

I looked at Magda for a moment, who, unmoved, refused even to say goodbye. I left the office with the certainty that my diplomas—my only shield against bureaucratic barbarism—were about to become a much bigger problem.

Bishkek, October 3, 2002

We had lunch at the rectory: a low-sodium beef, potato, and vegetable consommé, breaded chicken over spinach purée and rice, and apple pie with coffee. Father Peter is another German who preaches on the hardships his people suffered under Stalin. I refrained from mentioning that, at Mass, he greeted the German patriarchs kindly, but that they, perhaps after decades of persecution, refrained from holding any real conversation, answering my remarks only in monosyllables.

That afternoon, Anaïs was waiting for me at home, in the company of Nazgul, a slender Kyrgyz woman with long hair, straightened all the way down to her knees. Her presence filled the room: she spoke with the authority of someone whose words carry real power behind them.

"Je suis la consul de la France ici, en Kirghizistan," she told me, in a Parisian accent that moved me. "The ambassador received instructions from Marseille to formalize your residency in Bishkek."

I opened a bottle of sherry we'd been keeping since our arrival and asked her about her past. Daughter of a Kyrgyz father and a Russian mother, Nazgul, a French student, had met a Parisian man online in 1995. Their marriage had been celebrated before the French ambassador in 1996, and her citizenship had only been granted a year earlier.

"The ambassador was very pleased to have a French woman with local roots," she told us, with a hint of pride, "all the more so because my father was an active member of the local police."

"And what was the reason for his pleasure?" I asked.

"Plenty of French teenagers come to this part of the world looking for heroin," she told us, with that frankness so typical of French officials, "and it had already

cost the embassy quite a bit of money to free those citizens from a ten-year sentence or worse. Our administration, in fact, pays a fee to the local force that exempts French citizens from any minor offense."

"You have no idea how glad I am to hear that," I sighed, and told her what had happened to José's unfortunate Cuban friend.

Nazgul's expression hardened slightly.

"I'd advise you to be very careful," she warned as she left. "Above all, be wary of any students or professors who might try to seduce you."

I searched for my diplomas with Anaïs's help and couldn't find them. We checked every drawer, every folder, every corner of the apartment. Nothing. We concluded someone had entered while we were out. The door showed no signs of forced entry, but that meant nothing in a country where KGB master keys were still in circulation.

"I'll request a copy from the University of Philadelphia," I said, finally. "They'll just have to wait."

"Let's call Nazgul," Anaïs suggested. "We'll find out how influential she really is."

I immediately picked up the receiver of the purple plastic phone in our apartment and dialed her number. She answered. There was a long pause before she said she'd come over, and in that pause I sensed something I couldn't quite decipher: caution, or calculation. Twenty minutes later she was back with a smartly uniformed policeman; to my surprise, I recognized Sultan.

"Do you also work for the French embassy?" I asked.

"I'm in charge of intelligence services," he answered, his eyes sweeping the apartment as though taking inventory. "But please, don't tell anyone at SEP."

"I understand Darixa is a relative of yours," I remarked.

"That doesn't mean she knows all of my duties," he noted.

"Sultan is my brother," Nazgul cut in. "I'm sure he'll help us find out what happened to those diplomas."

I told him what had happened, careful not to mention the Faculty's requirements. We invited them to eat, but they declined. Sultan fell silent for a moment, drumming his fingers on the table.

"I can't promise anything this week," he said, finally. "There are procedures. But I'll do what I can."

It was the first time he didn't offer me a charming smile.

That night I slept badly. I thought of Misha—of what she had confessed to me in Utkin's bathroom, of the broken voice with which she'd told me about the mustached professors, and the favors bought with folded bills—and wondered whether someone might be looking for her, or whether she might simply have vanished from the city without anyone even registering her absence.

Bishkek, October 4, 2002

I was having a black coffee at the café around nine in the morning when Oleg approached me.

"Finally," he told me, with a honeyed look, "what is your nationality?"

I studied him, puzzled, and concluded he'd been sent by Arkadina.

"French," I said, and, calmly sipping my coffee, I turned my back to him.

"But," he stammered, "do you have a French passport, or don't you?"

"The one I used to enter the country."

Oleg slapped the table and left, visibly rattled. I wondered what my situation might have been had I entered with my Colombian passport. If they could do to Álvaro what they'd done, what was stopping them from doing the same to me?

That afternoon, we met with the French

ambassador, who formalized the signing of my birth registration.

"I notice you've dropped the surname Ferreira," he observed. "Is there any reason for that?"

"Nothing more than cultural adaptation," I replied. "In France, only one surname is used."

"D'accord!" he exclaimed, offering me his hand.

Bishkek, October 5, 2002

Insistent knocking on the door woke us at four in the morning. I opened it, and Sultan greeted me with a grave expression. He wasn't the affable man I'd met at the concert, nor the efficient official who had promised to recover my documents. He was someone else entirely: an intelligence officer bringing bad news.

"You'd better come with me," he told me, his hand resting on his revolver.

I dressed quickly, and we went out into the courtyard, where a group of several policemen surrounded a dark shape on the dirt ground.

It was Misha.

Her body lay in a pool of blood spreading like a black flower beneath the streetlamps. She wore the same worn jacket Anaïs had given her, the one I'd seen her in hundreds of times while she begged at the building's entrance. The sweetness of her childlike expression contrasted brutally with her slit throat.

"No!" I shouted, lunging toward her body.

Two policemen held me back.

"You can't get close," one of them warned me, in a voice so neutral it sounded like he was reading an official bulletin.

I composed myself. I took a deep breath. I signaled to Sultan, with a gesture, that I wouldn't try again.

"Did you know her?" Sultan asked me.

"I gave her alms fairly often," I nodded, my voice cracking. "She was a beggar around here. I suspect she was

addicted to heroin.”

I did not add that I had considered adopting her. I did not add that I was still paying the shopkeeper for her breakfast. Some things, I thought, were better left unsaid.

“We found these documents in her hands,” Sultan said, showing me a blood-stained folder. “It seems she’d stolen them.”

My diplomas. The very ones I had searched for in vain. Now they were there, in the dead hands of a teenager who had slept in the street and died in a pool of her own blood.

From a distance, wrapped in the pre-dawn fog, in a mink coat, I made out Nazgul’s silhouette climbing down from a police van.

“Who did it?” I asked Sultan.

“According to a taxi driver,” he answered, handing me the folder, “she got into a fight with her pimp. We already have three other witnesses to the killing. Several neighbors watched the fight from their balconies.”

I checked that none of the diplomas were missing.

“Thanks to Sultan,” Nazgul told me, walking over, “you’ll be able to present those documents tomorrow. But I’d advise you to burn the folder.”

I looked at her, surprised.

“It’s spattered with blood,” she pointed to a faint line of already-clotted droplets.

“How horrible,” I sighed, instinctively checking my hands.

The policemen wrapped the body in a black plastic bag. The sound of the zipper opening was like a gunshot. They lifted it into the bed of the truck, and the suspension groaned under the weight. There was something unbearably administrative about the whole gesture: Misha’s body dispatched like an overnight paperwork chore.

“But,” I stammered, “how did she get into our apartment?”

Sultan showed me a key he pulled from a clear plastic bag.

“We found this master key among her clothes,” he sighed. “They were quite common during the years the KGB had its base of operations here. That’s why we recommend you bolt the door before going to sleep.”

“Which isn’t possible when we go out,” I murmured.

“You’re very sharp,” Sultan praised me, then immediately added, in an intimidating tone, “I’d ask you to be discreet.”

“Is there some reason this crime shouldn’t be public knowledge?” I asked, puzzled.

“SEP doesn’t want scandals connected to its faculty,” Sultan said. “You know how NGOs are. Image is everything.”

“It’s also not in our interest for you to be investigated,” Nazgul snapped, and her voice had lost all its diplomatic warmth. “The press could imply your relationship with this beggar was more than a casual one.”

“How’s that?” I stammered.

“Isn’t it true you once invited her up to your apartment?” Sultan asked, his face stern. “At least, that’s what one of your neighbors told us.”

It was obvious the source in question was Vladimir. I nodded, silently reproaching myself; after all, I was standing before the head of Kyrgyz intelligence.

Sultan walked off with the officers. Nazgul quietly asked me if I knew of anyone who might want to frame me. I told her about the trouble at the Faculty.

“Any foreigner is *persona non grata* to them,” she said. “I have no doubt about your innocence.”

She glanced for a few moments at the blood-stained folder and said goodbye, promising to speak with the ambassador about my situation.

Back home, I closed the door and collapsed onto the bed in a deep silence. The blood-stained folder sat on

the nightstand. I couldn't stop staring at it. Anaïs sat beside me and held me for several minutes.

"I know how much you cared for that poor girl," she told me, once I'd recounted what had happened.

"Her murder will go unpunished," I murmured. "And the worst part is I can't even seek justice."

I wondered whether Sultan had tracked her down, and whether that had triggered her pimp's fury. I wondered whether she had stolen the diplomas on her own initiative, wanting to return them to me, or whether someone had sent her. I wondered, above all, whether her death had anything to do with what she'd told me that night in Utkin's bathroom: the mustached professors, the money, the favors. Unanswered questions are the worst form of grief.

I got up and played the opening chords of the Moonlight Sonata on the piano.

"Only to God," I added.

"Only to God," Anaïs repeated, resting her hands on my shoulders.

That night I dreamed of Misha. She didn't speak. She pointed at something I couldn't quite see.

Bishkek, October 6, 2002

I slept poorly. I woke twice for no apparent reason, certain there was someone in the apartment, and both times the apartment was empty and silent. The third time I stayed awake, staring at the ceiling, until the sun came in through the blinds.

Parvaneh called us that afternoon and introduced us to Werner, her Teutonic gentleman. He was delighted that I spoke to him in German; after three vodkas, out on the wide terrace overlooking the city's jagged skyline, Werner confessed to us that he had been a soldier in the Hitler Youth, tasked with spotting enemy ships from a watchtower on the North Sea.

"Did you ever spot any?" I asked him, and something in my voice must have sounded different from mere curiosity, because Werner looked at me for a moment before answering.

"Two," he said, finally. "In '44."

He said nothing more, and I didn't ask either. I took a sip of vodka and thought of the men aboard those ships, wondering whether they'd had time to see the sea before the sea covered them. Werner looked out at the city with the eyes of someone who has learned, over the years, not to see certain things.

"How has it been with your apartment?" Parvaneh asked me, changing the mood of the terrace in an instant.

"It doesn't have a panoramic view of the city like this one," Anaïs answered, her hair stirred by the autumn breeze, "and it lacks the modern washing machines and microwave ovens we saw in Whitney's and Annula's apartments, but somehow we've made do."

"New washing machines?" Parvaneh asked, not hiding her indignation.

"Whitney," Anaïs said, "even has an aquarium."

"It's clear there's a racist pyramid in this organization," Parvaneh declared.

"I suspect Tom Robinson already made that observation to them," I answered, "and, to refute it, they hired an Indian woman to head SEP this year. Honestly, those comforts don't concern me much."

"You're not the one doing the laundry," Anaïs shot at me.

"Fair enough!" I conceded.

Parvaneh told us the story of her apartment: the two weeks of searching, the tiny one-window room Mirbek had first offered her, the discovery that SEP paid a hundred and eighty dollars in rent for her and pocketed the rest of the budget. The apartment where she lived she had found with the help of a student; her landlady, Cholpon, a sixty-year-old woman well-read in the classics of world

literature, had revealed to her that the real budget per professor was four hundred dollars, and eight hundred if arriving as a couple.

"My guess is your budget ended up in Whitney's pocket," Parvaneh concluded, venomously.

"Maybe," I told Anaïs, considering that our own rent barely reached three hundred dollars a month.

When we said goodbye to Werner, I shook his hand and thought, without meaning to, of Misha. Of what's left of a life when no one is left to ask after it.

Bishkek, October 7, 2002

At seven in the morning I presented my original diplomas to Saikal. The secretary paled at the sight of them and examined them for several minutes before telling me she would pass them on to Arkadina.

"You're turning them in a bit late," she remarked.

I wondered whether the diplomas had been stolen by them, and whether, for some reason beyond their control, they hadn't managed to keep hold of them. Had they hired Misha, and had she, coincidentally, been killed by her pimp for failing to report the arrangement to him? Or had Misha caught the pimp red-handed and stolen the diplomas to return them to me, thereby causing her own tragedy? It was also possible Sultan had tracked her down, unleashing the pimp's fury. None of these versions left me in the clear. In every one of them, Misha died because of something connected to me.

In class, students complained that the material on the fundamentals of filmmaking was scattered across too many texts, so I promised to write up a concise handout for the following week. As I spoke, I couldn't stop watching Leo, taking notes with his usual monastic devotion, as though the scandal that had destroyed Valentino's career were nothing more than a distant rumor.

Bishkek, October 8, 2002

Yesterday we bought a CD of popular Russian music downtown. We listened to those unfamiliar tunes with delight, especially "Пять минут на любовь" ("Five Minutes for Love"), which we danced to until sunset. I wonder whether that song, which moves us so, will one day become reality. Will I leave Anaïs, or will she leave me? Will we be reduced to a five-minute memory of love? That we like that tune unsettles me.

Anaïs received a message from Kurt, her former boss, who, besides wishing her a happy stay, told her the doors of his company remain open for her return in 2003, whether in England, France, or Germany.

"Consider," she told me that night, "that this beggar girl's death still troubles me. That's why I took the liberty of writing to Kurt."

"I want to keep teaching until I've learned Russian and Kyrgyz," I said.

"But don't you see how they scorn you here?" Anaïs snapped. "Since you arrived they've been trying to break you. They refuse to accept that a third-worlder could surpass them in knowledge. That you're resilient is a quality I admire, but don't expect their goodwill to match your own."

"Wait until I hand them my essay on the essence of cinema," I said. "If they keep attacking me, I'm willing to give up my post in Central Asia and go back with you to Europe."

She didn't answer. She turned toward the window, and I stayed there, looking at her back, thinking that sometimes Anaïs's silence was more eloquent than any argument.

Bishkek, October 9, 2002

Last night we had a very fun dinner with José and Tatiana at Chinatown, Bishkek's best Chinese restaurant. Among the tales from the picaresque novel that was José's

life in Cuba, he told us that during his younger years he'd worked as a waiter at the bar of a hotel for foreigners, alongside the famous singer-songwriter Silvio Rodríguez, who, questioned by the playwright Harold Pinter about his complicity with the Castros' veiled tyranny, made me swear I wouldn't repeat a word of what I heard to my bosses, then answered that his songs were, in truth, curses cast against Fidel and Raúl Castro.

"Are you the Petronius of the Caribbean?" Pinter asked, skeptically.

"Think about the lyrics of one of my songs," Silvio nodded, "for instance."

"Something about your old government of the dead and of flowers," the Englishman nodded. "How remarkable!"

Silvio, José went on, then sang the final verse with a small variation, wishing that Fidel's constant gaze, his precise words, his perfect smile, might end; that something would come along and suddenly erase him, a blinding light, a shot of snow; that death itself might at least come to take José away, so as not to have to see him anymore, so as not to see him always, in every second, in every vision.

"I'll write a play about this," Pinter said, before saying goodbye, "and I'll call it *Celebration*."

"And yet," I objected, "Pinter has been a firm defender of the Cuban tyranny before the international community."

"He wants the Nobel Prize for Literature," José replied, "and you know how popular, among the Swedes, writers who support nations opposed to prevailing capitalism tend to be."

In the end I had to correct the bill, since they'd charged us for an extra main course. José seemed uneasy about my complaint. I went home thinking that integrity, in this country, comes at the price of discomfort.

Today we began our German classes with Olga

Zarikov, a small, graceful woman with an oval face, blue eyes, and bleached blonde hair, always carefully styled. She almost always wore jeans and polo shirts, with simple makeup that, far from dulling her, only enhanced her discreet charm. I had sought her out because she worked as a professor in the University's language department and taught German. From our very first conversation she showed a fondness for me; she was pleased, even excited, that I was studying German with such discipline. She told me she belonged to the German diaspora of Central Asia, the same community Father Hans came from, though she was no longer Catholic. I never asked her directly what she believed; I assumed, from the cold, practical way she spoke of religion, that she was probably an atheist.

She charged us five dollars a class and, together with Anaïs, we quickly worked through most of level A2. Olga often praised my progress and the discipline with which I studied. Charming, calm, and direct, she would confess to Anaïs weeks later, at the café, while I'd gone to get us something to drink, that she was tired of the men in the region. When Anaïs asked whether she had a husband, she answered, with a dry smile, that she preferred to live alone. According to her, too many men in Kyrgyzstan were trapped by heroin and opium, "the true scourge of this region," as she bitterly put it. She said that many Kyrgyz women dreamed of finding a Western man, not so much out of a desire to live in Europe, but because they imagined such men to be free of the plague of drugs.

We invited her over often, and she always kept a warm, cordial relationship with us. The only disagreement we ever had was over the length of the lessons. We'd contracted them for a full hour, but she later cut them down to forty-five minutes; I tried, somewhat timidly, to raise the matter, and she, very seriously, explained that for her, an "academic hour" was equivalent to the same length as my own university classes; I conceded the point with a smile.

After we returned to London we lost touch; I still smile remembering that small figure with her impeccable blonde hair, walking into the apartment in her fitted jeans, German grammar folders tucked under her arm, and that strange mix of Soviet toughness and European warmth that I found so appealing.

We came away so enthused from our first class with Olga that we visited the Faculty of Kyrgyz Language and Culture, where we spoke with Professor Jamilya, who agreed to give me private Kyrgyz lessons with a smile that made clear it was the first time a foreign professor had ever requested them.

17. The Ten Films That Shook the World

*Reality increasingly resembles what we see through
the camera*

Susan Sontag

Bishkek, October 10, 2002

SEP invited us to a lunch on the outskirts of the city, where the emergency budget for students was discussed.

While we sipped wine, Darixa walked over to a grand piano set off to one side of the dining room. She played the opening bars of Bach's *The Well-Tempered Clavier*. She finished, and the crowd gave her an ovation. Anaïs then asked me to show everyone my progress on the piano. I got up and played most of Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*. They applauded me, though with less enthusiasm, and sitting back down I noticed the applause had lasted exactly as long as necessary not to seem rude.

Venkatesh raised his glass.

"I want to toast Marco Saint-André!" he said, in that cheerful voice that won him so many admirers. "One of the smartest men I know! Cheers!"

The crowd hadn't expected such a gesture. They applauded and raised their glasses, dutifully. Across from me I watched the faces of Darixa, Arkadina, and Annula, sitting together at the same table; every one of them looked at Venkatesh with the identical expression: glassy eyes, pale skin, not daring to applaud, as though what he'd just done were some form of betrayal whose full scale they were still calculating.

"Thank you, Marco!" I heard a voice behind me.

It was Whitney, who, raising her glass, smiled with exaggerated warmth.

"Especially for having decided to play us a piano piece none of us actually asked for."

The crowd applauded again, oblivious to her subtle irony. I took a sip of wine and said nothing. It was a reminder that, however much Beethoven I played, however much German I spoke, however French my passport, to Whitney I would always remain the foreigner daring to occupy a space that wasn't his. In this country, I thought, generosity and humiliation are served in the same glass.

Bishkek, October 11, 2002

We were unexpectedly invited by Edward and Izatbek to a lunch at Arkadina's apartment, where she received us with that warmth so typical of Russians and showed us Igor, her eleven-month-old firstborn.

Igor played with me, and when I asked about his health, she told me he'd had a test done and it had revealed he had the same auditory capacity as Mozart.

"Big expectations for Igor to live up to, with a mother like that," Anaïs told me that afternoon, once we were back home.

Arkadina told me, her eyes tinged with sadness, that the Communications Department was at a crossroads, unsure whether to define itself around journalism, advertising, or television. Until now they'd leaned toward journalism, but since advertising agencies had flourished throughout the city, demand had shifted toward new marketing professionals; journalism, as a result, had seen a considerable decline.

"There's a proposal before the presidency to turn the Communications Department into an Advertising Department," she sighed, defeated, "eliminating journalism and television."

"My advice," I said, "is to keep a shared curriculum for the first six semesters. Only from the seventh onward

would students choose their specialization."

Arkadina's eyes lit up, but immediately hardened again, which I read as anger at herself for not having thought of it sooner.

"That sounds wonderful," Arkadina said, cradling her child, "but we don't have faculty here for all three tracks."

"They're not hard to find," I replied, understanding that her real aim now was to steer me away from the department's pool of improvement proposals, "especially with SEP's support."

"And how's your semester going?" Arkadina smiled, her eyes damp, abruptly changing the subject.

"Fine," I nodded, "though I'm afraid the student Zernebog has already failed the course for absences."

"Impossible," she stammered, nervously.

"I've called his residence," I nodded, "but he doesn't answer. He attended the first two weeks of class in August, and hasn't been back since. You know three weeks of absence is enough to fail a course."

"I'll talk to him," she promised, swallowing hard, "and see what we can do."

I repeated that his case was already beyond remedy, but Arkadina got up and announced she would soon be traveling to the United States to give several lectures at the University of Iowa.

"All thanks to the generosity of the Soros Foundation," she told me, her permanently sleepless eyes narrowing.

Back home, Anaïs asked me what I thought of Arkadina. I told her she was a woman who knew exactly what she was doing and preferred that I remain ignorant of it. That this, at least, struck me as more honest than Whitney.

Bishkek, October 13, 2002

I devoted Saturday and the early hours of Sunday

to writing an essay approaching cinema not from taste, in the Kantian sense, but from epistemology—that is, from perception. I took Hume and his approach to the principle of causality as the axis for an idea that struck me as elemental, and yet one no one had clearly articulated before: that cinema does not invent a way of seeing, but replicates and intensifies the way we already see.

The central argument is this: the relationship between cause and effect—which Hume considered scarcely reliable—is the same mechanism structuring every cinematic narrative. We hear a sound; we see an image; our mind manufactures a third meaning that neither element contains on its own. Montage is not a technique: it is an imitation of our own perception. That’s why Ionesco was right when he proclaimed, in *Victimes du Devoir*, that all theater—and, by extension, all cinema—has ever been nothing but a detective story: there is always an enigma waiting to be solved in the final scene. Conflict, I conclude, is the true unity of drama, not action, as Aristotle held in his *Poetics*, because every dramatic action is nothing more than the answer to a question the viewer cannot help but ask.

By the time I finished it was three in the morning. Anaïs was asleep. I sat on the balcony, looking at the city lights, and for a moment the weight of the last few weeks lifted. I had written something that would outlast Arkadina’s scheming, outlast Misha’s death, outlast Bishkek itself.

The provisional title is *Cinema and the Laws of Human Perception*.

Bishkek, October 14, 2002

Today we read my essay on cinema in class. The students received it warmly. Laurica pointed out how important it was that I’d acknowledged the contributions of Soviet cinema, from Kuleshov to Eisenstein.

“I’m very grateful,” Irina admitted—the student who used to eye me with suspicion. “Could you write us similar essays in the future?”

“I promise I will,” I said, already thinking of translating my essay on Edgar Allan Poe.

That afternoon I ran into Gulmira, who told me the Faculty had decided they wanted me to continue on for the next academic year.

“You have no idea how happy that makes me,” I said, with a smile so skeptical that Gulmira insisted on repeating the good news to me.

“I’d like to ask you something,” I told her, taking advantage of her good mood. “Saikal mentioned the Faculty has a digital Canon camera and a lighting kit. Could you help me arrange to borrow them? I want to shoot a documentary.”

“Professor Magda is in charge of the equipment,” Gulmira sighed. “I promise I’ll speak with Arkadina about it.”

Back home I sent the draft of my essay to several international publications. I wondered what Annula would say once she learned that one of the essays by the academic they’d snubbed over Mongolia was being published in an international journal.

Bishkek, October 15, 2002

Tensions have eased, thanks to the essay’s popularity. This morning Irina came to office hours for the first time to ask me about the principle of causality; I noticed her early resistance had been replaced by genuine curiosity.

Annula summoned me that afternoon to insist on the importance of organizing the Film Club. I assured her I’d already put together the lineup: ten films, one a week, starting October 25th. The idea was simple and, at its core, personal: films about individuals confronting systems that crush them. 1984, *The Crucible*, Welles’s *The Trial*, *The*

Seventh Seal. Films that would teach, as Hamlet wished, virtue its own features and vice its true image.

I took the chance to ask her about our rent budget.

“Aren’t you comfortable there?” she said, her voice tense.

“The entrance is dangerous,” I answered, “and the rugs are far too old.”

“And aren’t you happy with the piano?” she snapped.

“Of course,” I nodded. “But if the budget allotted for us as a couple is the equivalent of six hundred dollars, surely we could find another apartment with a piano, more comfortable, with a better view.”

“Who told you it was six hundred dollars?”

“Wasn’t there an American woman living where Parvaneh now lives?” I hesitated.

“That woman is a liar,” Darixa cut in from the doorway. “And in any case, we can no longer move you elsewhere.”

“Mirbek already paid for the full year,” Annula sighed.

“I see,” I said, standing up from my chair. But there was nothing to see. I already knew.

Bishkek, October 16, 2002

At noon I had lunch with Petra to discuss the Film Club’s programming. To my surprise, she had only one film in mind: *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, in her view an entire treatise on Realpolitik. We agreed to include it.

Annula and Darixa wrote to say they wanted the Film Club advertised in the city’s largest local newspaper, inviting the whole population. I told them I was worried about copyright law, since I had already run into a legal obstacle at Temple University over it.

Following Petra’s suggestion, I focused on themes reflecting the will of exceptional individuals against

oppressive systems, driven mostly by a wish that the audience might see reflected, in those films, the same drama I had found myself trapped in since my arrival; films that would teach virtue its own features, vice its true image, and every age and generation its own likeness and defining mark.

The Film Club’s first series will be:

Ten Films That Shook the World.

1984 — Michael Radford (1984)

Belle de Jour — Luis Buñuel (1967)

The Crucible — Nicholas Hytner (1996)

La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc — Carl Theodor

Dreyer (1928)

Mr. Smith Goes to Washington — Frank Capra (1939)

Galileo — Joseph Losey (1975)

The Trial — Orson Welles (1962)

Angst essen Seele auf (Ali: Fear Eats the Soul) —

Rainer Werner Fassbinder (1974)

The Idiot (白痴) — Akira Kurosawa (1951)

The Seventh Seal — Ingmar Bergman (1957)

“Copyright laws don’t apply here the way they do in Europe or the USA,” Darixa confirmed for me. “In the former Soviet republics, culture circulates freely.”

She said it with a matter-of-factness that reminded me that here, “freely” carries a different meaning than the one I learned.

That afternoon, while I was tying up the last details of the program, I got a message from Sultan. Brief, no greeting: he asked that I not mention Misha’s name in any context connected to the University, for my own good.

I read it twice. I saved it. And I understood that the diplomas had not been returned to me out of generosity, but so that I’d have something left to lose.

Bishkek, October 18, 2002

Despite the favorable reception my writing has had at the University, I've agreed to travel back to Europe if Anaïs receives a new job offer. I am thus giving up my hope of studying Russian for two years in a village along the Silk Road. I decided this after talking that afternoon with Parvaneh, at the University café; she told me, among other things, that her landlady had died the previous afternoon, of indigestion.

"Immediately," she told me, "her daughter, Ludmila, took possession of her properties, and this morning we signed a new lease." I was struck by the calm on her face; if not for her black clothing, one might have thought her a real-estate agent pleased with a good commission.

I told Anaïs about it while she made dinner.

"What do you think?" she asked me.

"Parvaneh suspects matricide," I answered, after a brief pause, "and, honestly, it does look that way. But I can't stop thinking about that discussion I had at SEP over our rent budget. They asked me where I'd gotten my figure, and, naïve as I was, I cited Parvaneh's landlady."

Anaïs set the spoon down on the pot and looked at me.

"Do you think it was them?"

"I don't know," I said. "Representing an international NGO headquartered in Washington, the wise thing would be not to believe it. But there are too many coincidences. Misha. Now Cholpon. Both connected, somehow, to something I did or said."

Anaïs turned back to the pot without answering. The silence had that particular texture of conversations left unfinished, because finishing them would demand action.

"Whether Mrs. Cholpon died of natural causes or poisoning," I said, finally, "it's not our place to weigh it. But it's wise to leave the battlefield while one still holds some advantage."

Bishkek, October 19, 2002

The Film Club proposal was warmly received by Annula, who, first thing this morning, approved the budget for a marketing campaign. Darixa, however, pointed out that the title might offend local sensibilities, given its similarity to John Reed's famous chronicle, *Ten Days That Shook the World*, about the rise of socialism. Jeff proposed instead the odd title *A Bishkek Call*; I said I had no objection to the new title, which, I knew, had actually been imposed by Rachel. We requested the film reels from New York, and around nine I went to Petra's apartment to assign the preliminary talks for each film.

"And Anaïs?" she asked me, once we'd finished our work.

"She's meeting Whitney," I told her. "They're going to the bazaar to buy some fabric. They want the local tailors to make them a couple of dresses."

"Doesn't it bother you that they're always together?" she said, pursing her lips the way the Swiss tend to.

"Not at all," I smiled. "Whitney's doing me a favor, since my duties don't leave me much time to accompany my wife around the city. Are you two going to today's lunch?"

"In a few minutes," Petra nodded. "As soon as Derogan gets back from the supermarket."

I left and walked through the city's central park complex, savoring every step, aware that those lavish buildings and those statues of fallen idols would fade from my life in the near future. Autumn was already tinging the leaves ochre, and a soft breeze stirred my hair.

On the sidewalk, near the Opera Theater, about three meters from the main avenue, I saw an elderly Kyrgyz man in his kalpak approaching from a distance. He walked slowly, his cane marking the rhythm of his steps, oblivious to everything.

Then I heard the engine. It wasn't the sound itself

that first alarmed me, but the change in it: a sudden, aggressive acceleration, out of step with the usual traffic at that hour. A white van with dark windows swerved out of its lane with a screech of tires that cut through the morning air. It wasn't heading toward the old man. It was heading toward me.

Time did not stand still, as people say it does in moments like these. On the contrary: it compressed. In a fraction of a second I remembered a Saturday night in Bogotá, a drunk driver's Mazda 626 bearing down on us, and what had saved us then: a streetlamp post. Instinctively I looked for the nearest one. It was behind me. I stepped back and circled it just as the van tore into the grass strip beside the sidewalk, its tires flattening the grass with a dull, wet sound.

The driver didn't brake. He accelerated toward me, forcing me to leap into the avenue. I circled the post back onto the sidewalk. The van plowed through a bush and struck the post head-on: the headlights burst in a shower of shattering glass, the hood buckled upward. Several cars stopped. The van lurched back into its lane, bouncing violently off the edge of the avenue, its torn bodywork scraping against the asphalt, and continued on its way without stopping.

The old man in the kalpak grabbed my arm. He was saying something in Kyrgyz I couldn't decipher. His eyes were wet. I assumed he was thanking Allah that we'd come out unscathed. The drivers of the stopped cars watched me with curiosity for a few moments and, seeing no injuries or significant damage, went on their way.

I stood on the sidewalk a moment longer than necessary. My hands were shaking. I looked at them as though they belonged to someone else.

I smiled at the old man, assured him everything was fine, and we parted like old acquaintances.

From there I walked to SEP's offices, where a bus

was waiting to take us to the resort on the outskirts of the city. I saw several colleagues from neighboring countries, who would be visiting for a week.

"There'll be a debate this afternoon," Darixa told me, with a tense look, "whose minutes you must draft."

"No problem," I nodded, gathering they meant to test my English writing skills.

While we waited for the others, I told my colleagues about what had happened on Usup Abdrahmanov Avenue. I tried to be precise: the van, the screech, the post, the impact.

"Are you sure you didn't dream it?" Venkatesh snapped, with premeditated sarcasm.

Gretchen, Parvaneh, and Venkatesh's laughter told me I should keep quiet about the hardships I was enduring.

Then Petra, Derogan, Whitney, and Anaïs arrived. Venkatesh retold my story as though it were a fable I'd invented.

"Was it true?" Anaïs asked me, once we were seated on the bus.

"Do you think I lie?" I answered.

"Sometimes," Anaïs replied.

"For God's sake!"

"Didn't you say you'd already worked in France?"

I looked at her, offended.

"With your grandfather!" I retorted. "I was his assistant for two days. Didn't we have to speak French together to make his eau de vie?"

"It's not the same thing."

"Of course it is," I insisted.

"And when did you say you'd seen Hillary Clinton at Temple University?" she shot back, with sudden fury.

"Excellent that you bring that up! I hadn't had the chance to clarify, but it was in March of 1996, in Washington, while I was taking classes at Temple University. A friend asked me to go with her, and there was Hillary, your idol, giving speeches."

Anaïs turned her face toward the landscape, still irritated.

"You never told me that," she grumbled.

"There are plenty of things I haven't told you," I nodded, "for instance, you haven't given me the chance to tell you I've been named secretary of this afternoon's debate."

"They're giving you too many tasks," she sighed, in a conciliatory tone.

I didn't answer. I watched the landscape and thought about the white van, the dark windows, about the fact that no one, except the old man in the kalpak, had stayed on the sidewalk long enough to catch the license plate.

At lunch we sat across from Omar, Flor, and Rick.

"So she really put you two on a diet," I remarked, noticing their flat stomachs.

"Flor cooks deliciously," Omar nodded, "no flour, no sugar in our apartment."

"You two share it?" Gretchen asked.

"All three of us do," Flor nodded. "Osh is a rather monotonous city for foreigners. We keep ourselves entertained, me learning Russian, them Spanish."

"And whose girlfriend is she?" Parvaneh asked, with her usual bluntness.

"We've both proposed marriage to her," Rick cut in, "but she still won't give us an answer."

"And I have no intention of giving one!" Flor exclaimed, with a skeptical smile. "I'd rather be friends with both of them."

The debate was about the topics we should propose for the international congress, to take place in April 2003, in which eight students from each Central Asian country would gather, funded by the U.S. State Department and SEP, at a hotel in Bishkek, to sharpen their argumentative and rhetorical skills.

The day was hot, so we went swimming in the pool from four onward. Coming out, I ran into Franz, his blond, scrawny figure wrapped in a red silk robe. He was smoking a cigar with an exquisite aroma.

"How's life going in the south of the country?" I asked, after greeting him.

"Excellent," he said, exhaling a smoke ring. "You're the Peruvian, right?"

"Colombian," I corrected him.

Only then did I notice his thick class ring, crowned with a ruby.

"Absurd that South Americans aren't a single nation," he grumbled. "Now that you have some prosperity is exactly when you should do it. Look at this nation: it has no resources to sustain itself and wants to join its neighbors, but none of them seem interested."

"Bishkek has a certain prosperity."

"Bishkek," he emphasized, as though the word itself were a rebuttal. "It's obvious you don't know the other regions. The south is so poor that if you drive down a road and see a twelve-year-old girl, you can perfectly well pull over and offer her some bread in exchange for sex."

"You don't say," I said, wondering whether he was recounting a personal experience.

"She says yes right away!" he exclaimed, sweeping his arm toward the mountains. "For a piece of bread, she'll sleep with you!"

"Out of hunger," I asked, "or because I'm a foreigner?"

"Both," he answered. "You must have already experienced harassment from some of your students."

"Honestly," I smiled, "no; I'll admit my wife warned her class, the first week, of the consequences of sexual harassment."

"French women are charming," he nodded, watching my wife's silhouette in her bikini by the pool, "but vindictive. You can consider yourself lucky if you last

five years with her.”

“I’ve always wanted to learn Danish,” I nodded. “I’m a great admirer of Søren Kierkegaard’s work.”

“You pronounce his name correctly,” he told me, with sudden interest.

“His prose is admirable,” I nodded. “*Fear and Trembling, The Concept of Anxiety*... are there any authors of our generation who surpass him?”

Franz let out a disenchanted snort, took a drag on his cigar, and walked off toward a table where Helen sat with two twin girls. Beside her, two Kyrgyz maids in perfectly matched black dresses and white aprons stood attentively, waiting on their needs.

“You wounded his ego,” Petra told me when I recounted what had happened, back at our table. “Franz has published two books about his time in Central Asia.”

“I don’t think he’ll speak to you again,” Anaïs said.

“According to Annula,” Venkatesh cut in, “Franz gets funding from several government institutions: the UN, the European Union, the Danish government, SEP, and England. Tom visited them last year; they live like Victorian dukes, in a mansion they built brick by brick, resembling the Regency Hotel in London.”

“It’s a beautiful Edwardian mansion,” I remarked.

“They have stables,” Venkatesh went on, “horses, cars, and a staff of more than twenty servants.”

“Lucky them!” Parvaneh exclaimed, with that sarcasm that meant: *I don’t know about the rest of you, but if I were in their shoes, I’d do exactly the same thing.*

“What do they actually do in Osh?” Gretchen asked, emerging from her usual self-absorption.

“Besides teaching,” Venkatesh said, “they represent the UN and the WHO in every family planning program. Don’t you notice the Nestlé shirt Helen’s wearing?”

I noticed that, indeed, Helen wore a white t-shirt

with the Nestlé logo. I thought of what Whitney had told me that first night: the babies’ graves in La Paz, the rusted cans used as vases. Helen smiled on the other side of the resort, entirely unaware I was watching her.

“The last thing I heard,” Venkatesh looked at me, “is that Franz is going to produce a documentary about bride kidnapping in this country.”

“He’s going to film a kidnapping?” I asked.

“Dorian knows more about it than anyone.”

“Who?”

“I’ll introduce you.”

He got up and led me to a table inside the restaurant, where a blond, blue-eyed man was chatting calmly with Annula.

Dorian was an Irishman who had been teaching for two years at various universities in the region; he rubbed shoulders with ministers and presidents thanks to his silk shirts, his velvety voice, and the smoothness of his manners. He was an English gentleman in the Victorian sense, though the comparison, given his ancestry, would have offended him. His travels and commitments kept him away from SEP’s more dutiful group sessions.

“I want to congratulate you two on the Film Club program, *A Bishkek Call*,” he told me. “Annula showed me the schedule, and I have to admit it will shake up the whole region. My opinion is that we should screen it simultaneously in Almaty.”

Annula sighed, visibly embarrassed.

“Let’s first see how the Kyrgyz react,” she said. “Besides, Darixa wants Petra and Marco to speak with Irina, daughter of the most famous Kyrgyz film director of the Soviet era.”

“It would be a pleasure,” I nodded, hiding my irritation. Why did we have to consult a relic of some obsolete nation? I already anticipated dull films about nomads overcoming the obstacles of Soviet “modernity” to preserve their traditions. In a moment of clarity, the

answer to my own rhetorical question spelled itself out plainly before my eyes: because we still lived in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

"I'll go find Darixa and Petra," Annula said, rising from her seat.

"I wanted to ask you about the documentary Franz is planning to make about bride kidnapping in the region," I told Dorian.

"Ah!" he exclaimed. "Isn't that controversial?"

"How does he plan to film it?"

"Why don't you just ask him?" he said, smiling.

I nodded, admiring his sharpness.

"Maybe you'll be more honest with me."

"I don't agree with kidnapping a young woman to make it happen," he replied, after a brief pause. "That's why I plan to distance myself from the production team."

"You know that taking part in a crime like that is dangerous for a Westerner."

"It's very common around here," Dorian replied. "Couples in love arrange it themselves, to save on wedding costs."

"And when it isn't consensual?" I snapped. "When the woman is raped, so that, shunned by every man in her community, she has no choice left but to marry her rapist?"

"I hope Franz doesn't take part in that kind of kidnapping," Dorian nodded. "As I said, he most likely won't be part of the project. Since we're talking, tell me about your own work instead. Maybe we could do something together."

I told him about my documentary on Manatí and Colombia's agrarian reform. He asked what ideas I had for a documentary in Bishkek, and I told him I'd like to film the international debate we were preparing between young people from every former Soviet republic in Central Asia. It would follow a tournament structure, with two finalists facing off at the climax—with the advantage that it

wouldn't be an athletic competition, but an argumentative one.

"That's a wonderful idea," he nodded. "It should be called: *Bishkek Transfer*; I'd be glad to join in making it. What can we do to make it happen?"

"Honestly," I sighed, "I've fought so many battles with my Faculty's staff since I got here that I doubt we'd be able to pull it off."

"Doesn't the University," Dorian hesitated, "have equipment available for professors?"

"In theory," I nodded, "but they haven't even let me see the digital video camera they have. There's a professor who uses it for weddings and social events, and I suspect she pays her colleagues commissions to keep them from bothering her about it."

We were called to eat, and on the way we ran into Anaïs and Whitney, coming back from the pool. Anaïs told Dorian about our trip to Dublin the previous November, just before my thirty-third birthday.

"I'd always wanted to see the tower that opens James Joyce's *Ulysses*," I said, holding Anaïs affectionately, "and my wife gave me three days' vacation at the Hilton Hotel as a gift."

"You're the age Jesus Christ was before his death," Dorian remarked, with the ease of someone raised in Catholic schools. "Are you ready for your Calvary yet?"

"More like his resurrection."

We sat at a table for four, set apart from the crowd by a column and a planter of hyacinths, and talked about passages from Joyce's work, until Darixa burst in and pulled Dorian off to her own table.

I noticed Whitney had barely touched her food. Once Dorian had left, I asked whether she was feeling all right.

"That mention of the Lennerts' work has upset me," she said, finally.

What followed surprised me, not for what she

said—I already knew the story of the cans, she'd told me that first night with the same composure with which one comments on the weather, shrugging, "that's how the world works"—but for how she said it this time. Her voice trembled. Her eyes had filled with water.

"I'm not the same person I was back then," she murmured.

Anaïs took her hand. I stayed silent, wondering whether what I was seeing was genuine, or whether Whitney was simply doing what she did best: reading the temperature of a room and adjusting her own performance to match it. I didn't know how to answer myself then; now I suspect both impulses coexisted: her guilt or remorse was as real as her hunger for the spotlight in an academic world she had commandeered since her early youth.

"There's a scene that has tortured me my whole life," she went on, her voice trembling. "At the end of my work in Bolivia, before heading back to Oklahoma, I saw a row of babies' graves in a cemetery in La Paz. The mothers, unable to afford headstones, used rusted Nestlé cans as vases: they tied them with wire to a nail driven into the cement, on which they wrote, with their fingers, in the wet cement, the names of the children they'd rocked for barely a month or two."

Whitney looked at Anaïs, her eyes wet.

"And it was in those very cans that their grieving mothers laid, through their tears, their floral offerings!" She burst into tears and embraced Anaïs.

"And it was Nestlé that funded her scholarship," Petra remarked from her seat, thus avenging the insult Whitney had inflicted on her, in front of Derogan, months earlier.

Whitney simply broke down crying without answering; I now think that remorse and strategy are not mutually exclusive in a person capable of enduring two years in a nation whose language she doesn't speak, relying

on scarce moments of sociability with local professors and students, and on meetings where she often found herself overshadowed, when not condemned to silence, by her more accomplished, articulate colleagues.

Anaïs signaled with a gesture that I should leave them alone. I got up. Passing by Helen's table, I saw the Nestlé shirt again, that red-and-white logo on clean cotton, and thought the world was full of people participating in the same system from opposite sides, each believing themselves the exception.

I moved into the main hall, where Annula, Darixa, and Dorian were chatting animatedly.

"I'm telling Annula," Dorian explained, seeing me, "how important it would be for you to make a documentary about the International Conference."

"We can't have the equipment," Darixa snapped. "The proper channels need to be followed."

"There's still a month until the conference," I answered, conciliatory. "I'll write a letter to the Faculty, to see if we can make *Bishkek Transfer* happen."

Bishkek, October 20, 2002

I drafted the minutes from yesterday's debate and sent them to Darixa, who never acknowledged receiving my message. As a precaution, I sent it again, copying Annula this time; Darixa immediately replied she had already received it. With that written record, I hope, they'll drop any suspicion cast on the authorship of my essay on cinema.

I also received, around nine that night, a message inviting the reader to download photos of naked French women. What struck me wasn't the content—pornographic garbage exists, circulates, finds recipients—but the original recipient: the message was addressed to Whitney Jefferson. It seemed a trojan had forwarded an email she had requested to every one of her usual contacts.

I closed it. I opened it again. I closed it.

I didn't want to build a theory. I had already made that mistake too many times over these past weeks: seeing patterns where there might only be coincidence, attributing intent where there might only be clumsiness or chance. The email could have been a trap set by the locals to provoke a reaction from me. It could be exactly what it appeared to be. It could be something I was simply incapable of imagining from my position as a Latin American husband in Bishkek, surrounded by people who studied me as though I were some cultural experiment.

A Socratic proverb, memorized in my Ancient Greek classes, came back to my mind:

Το μὲν πυρὸς ὁ ἀνέμος, τὸν δὲ ἔρωτα ἡ συνήθεια ἐκκαίει

Fire is fanned by the wind; love, by habit.

I remembered Petra's pursed lips, her warning about Anaïs's friendship with Whitney. I wondered, without wanting to reach any conclusion, what kind of person Whitney Jefferson was when no one was watching. And then I wondered whether that question was even any of my business.

I saved the email without replying. I closed the computer. Like Bergman's characters, I was more ready to dissolve than to mend my relationship at the slightest sign of Anaïs's discontent. That, I thought, was not wisdom. It was fear wearing another name.

18. Bishkek Transfer

Bishkek, October 21, 2002

Arkadina's office smelled of reheated coffee and a cheap floral perfume that had already gone stale. The cold, humming light of the fluorescent tubes fell mercilessly on her face, deepening the dark circles that seemed tattooed beneath her eyes. Outside, autumn's leaden sky pressed down on the Soviet apartment blocks.

Arkadina informed me that morning, acting as the minister of bad news delivered in measured installments:

"Your class will be evaluated this Friday, by Narguiza and Dr. Utkin."

She said it without looking me in the eye, her gaze fixed on some indeterminate point on her desk. I understood at once that this bit of news was more bureaucratic procedure than veiled threat. I nodded without changing my expression. I was used to it by now: in those Soviet hallways, composure was the only effective armor against conspiracy.

"And Zernebog?" I asked. "Do you know anything about him?"

Arkadina raised her eyebrows with apparent surprise, as though the name had suddenly become unfamiliar to her.

"Zernebog?" she repeated. "Hasn't he spoken with you yet?"

I shook my head slowly. She shook hers too, with that cadence of someone feigning regret over something she had, in fact, carefully orchestrated.

"How strange..." she murmured.

I added then:

"I also wanted to talk to you about next semester's courses."

Her expression changed entirely. A sudden, overly

bright enthusiasm lit up her features.

"Of course! I actually wanted to ask you to present me with plans for Screenwriting and Acting for Film as elective courses." She leaned forward slightly. "Also, the dean of the English Faculty wants you to come see her right away. They're very impressed with your literary knowledge and want you to design several courses for them."

I accepted, but asked at once:

"Would those courses be electives?"

Arkadina smiled with a cynicism so premeditated it was almost admirable, like a magician performing his trick before a spectator who already knows the secret.

"Of course," she answered. "Electives."

I pressed:

"And I won't be teaching required courses like this semester?"

"I hadn't noticed that," she answered, with a fluency that only comes from sustained practice in lying. "Don't worry, I'll speak with the Faculty's professors."

I calmly pointed out:

"I'm already used to not being invited to those meetings. Even so, I'd like to be present when the matter is discussed."

Arkadina suddenly adopted a worried expression, like someone putting on a mask of good will.

"Of course," she said, conciliatory. "We'll meet this Friday at one in the afternoon."

Back in the hallway, I stopped for a moment to gather my thoughts, resting a hand against the cold wall while I watched students come and go, carrying their folders without lifting their eyes from the ground, accustomed as they were to ignoring anything outside their system of immediate survival; I understood that Friday had been designed as a double-locking trap: a class evaluation first thing in the morning, with Narguiza and Utkin taking

notes in silence from the back row, hunting for the angle from which to attack; then, a Faculty meeting at noon, where the decisions would already have been made beforehand, and my presence would serve only as decorative witness to my own announced defeat.

This was no longer a pedagogical evaluation, but a trial, and I was the only one who didn't know exactly what the charge was, which was, of course, an essential part of the strategy; I spent the rest of the morning mentally reviewing my classes, tracking down weak points with the thoroughness of someone inspecting a ship's hull before a storm, preparing answers to questions no one would ask me directly but that would hang in the air like an invisible gas; that is how academic paranoia operates in systems inheriting from Sovietism: it turns the accused into his own prosecutor, forces him to judge himself before anyone else does, and, by the time the verdict comes, the condemned man has already spent weeks helping build his own conviction.

Faculty of Anglo-American Studies, October 21, 2002

Dean Ulrika Devyatkin's office smelled of artificial flowers and a carefully domesticated ambition. I received her standing, discreetly taking in the space: peeling walls of an institutional beige, large cut-crystal vases holding plastic flowers, and framed posters of works by Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller, and Edward Albee, arranged with a symmetry that spoke more of discipline than of genuine passion for theater. Through the window, Bishkek's grey sky was beginning to release the first drops of an autumn drizzle.

Ulrika Devyatkin was a woman of about fifty. She wore a red wool suit trimmed with faux ermine, her slim waist cinched by a patent leather belt that fell carelessly over her hips. Her lips, painted a bright red, and her almond eyes shadowed in pale blue, gave her a strange geisha-like appearance, a touch of deliberate elegance that

seemed an act of resistance against the Soviet ugliness surrounding her.

"I see you like American theater," she said, with a calculated smile, noticing my gaze on the posters.

"And don't you like Tennessee Williams's plays?" I asked at once. "His absence from these walls is rather telling."

"Ah!" she exclaimed, and in that single syllable lay the whole complexity of her situation. "Personally, I love them... though you probably know how Kyrgyz society is."

I nodded silently. We both knew Williams was absent as a matter of political calculation. Neither of us would say it out loud. At that university, silences carried more information than words.

She invited me to sit across from her desk, where stacks of folders with worn edges piled up.

A gentle drizzle tapped softly against the dusty window glass.

"Which authors do you know best?" she asked, with a dreamy expression. "I'd like you to teach some courses on them next year."

I listed them calmly:

"Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, Christopher Marlowe, Milton, Samuel Pepys, Sheridan, Laurence Sterne, Dickens, Shelley, Stevenson, Lord Byron, Samuel Beckett, Lawrence Durrell..."

Ulrika watched me with an astonishment that, for the first time, seemed genuine. She fell silent, as though listening to a familiar melody she couldn't quite name.

"I've also read Chesterton, Hume, and Bernard Shaw," I added. "Should I mention Bram Stoker or Arthur Machen as well?"

She ignored the second part and got straight to the point, with an inquisitorial air that revealed the interview's true purpose:

"Do you know the work of Agatha Christie?"

"Since adolescence," I answered, with a barely perceptible sigh she read as condescension, though it was really pure exhaustion.

"Christie is very popular in these parts," she replied, with an air of superiority. "Could you give me the titles of at least three of her novels?"

I smiled patiently and listed them:

"Murder on the Orient Express, Death on the Nile, Murder in Three Acts, Appointment with Death..."

She silenced me with a gesture before I could continue.

"I want you to give me three elective course proposals for this Friday," she declared. "One on Mrs. Christie, and two on any authors you see fit."

I nodded.

"One will cover Shakespeare's most forgotten tragedies," I noted, "the plays academic programs usually omit, because they demand a reader looking not merely for entertainment but, above all, for confrontation."

"And," she added, "I'd like you to propose a lesson plan for the required course on the History of Mass Media. Previous professors have systematically disappointed students' expectations."

In her voice I detected the echo of years of accumulated disappointment.

I looked at the wall clock. It was exactly noon.

"A storm is coming," I remarked, watching the drizzle grow heavier against the glass.

Ulrika stood, took a long black umbrella from the coat rack with an automatic gesture, the product of decades repeating the same movement at the same hour.

"We must take shelter before the sky decides to soak us," she said.

I met Anaïs at noon at the small Russian restaurant on the street adjacent to the university. It was a cozy, somewhat old-fashioned place, with red-and-white

checkered tablecloths, where the borscht always arrived steaming and the blinis with sour cream shone like some exotic luxury to Westerners used to buttered rolls. We settled at our usual table by the fogged-up window, from which we could see the feet of passersby hurrying along the wet, snowy sidewalk.

As soon as the waiter left with our order, I went straight to the subject weighing on me:

"I got an email from Whitney," I told her. "Everyone has their own particular aberrations, their own ways of processing loneliness or resentment. Though Petra's already hinted more than once that your friendship with her isn't well regarded in the university's hallways. It stirs up disparaging comments in certain circles."

Anaïs raised her left eyebrow with that characteristic weariness of hers, the gesture that always signaled a forceful opinion was coming.

"Petra is presumptuous," she replied. "She doesn't see me as an independent woman. She treats me like a mere decorative extension of your career. And if I told you what she says about you every time she gets the chance..."

"You should tell me," I answered firmly. "Since when do we keep secrets at home?"

She looked at me for a moment, eyes narrowed, testing the ground. Then she spoke with an edge meant to sound casual:

"Since you met Hillary Clinton in Washington."

I looked at her, wounded, without answering right away. I felt the weight of that reference, loaded with weeks of accumulated suspicion, of unspoken doubts and small hurts that had been settling like sediment at the bottom of our relationship.

"I thought we'd already cleared that up," I said, finally.

There was a pause in which Anaïs seemed to waver between stubbornness and affection. Finally she lowered

her eyes.

"Forgive me," she murmured. "Honestly, I pay little attention to the gossip that reaches me about you. I know your intellectual baggage inevitably stirs up jealousy among your colleagues... like a lit candle drawing moths that prefer the warmth, even if that warmth destroys them."

I stroked her cheek tenderly.

"I adore you," I told her softly, in French.

She closed her eyes and briefly rested her face against my palm, with that gesture of surrender that only appeared when she let all her defenses down for a moment.

We finished lunch talking about small things. Then we walked home along Chuy Avenue. The morning's drizzle had become a cold, persistent rain. Despite her thigh-length padded coat, Anaïs shivered now and then.

"This Saturday we're going to Dordoi," I told her. "I want you to pick the best fur coat we can find. Kyrgyz winter isn't the stuff of metaphor; it's a brutal reality we've already learned to endure."

Anaïs exclaimed, in that tone of hers, half grateful and half teasing:

"My Marquis!"

She held me, her damp hair stuck to her forehead and cheeks. Still, she added, with that French practicality that never fully left her:

"We only have three hundred dollars available."

I silenced her with a gentle gesture. She smiled, lips parted, lowered the arm I had wrapped around her, and kissed me softly at the corner of my mouth, blinking away the raindrops falling on her lashes.

"You know they could arrest us for this," I said, smiling, since public kisses were, in that city, a transgression the locals condemned with looks of disapproval more eloquent than any insult.

"Merde!" Anaïs exclaimed, glancing around, eyes wide. "For a moment I thought we were back in New

York, where people kiss on the subway and no one even looks up from their newspaper.”

We continued on, hand in hand, down Chuy Avenue. The rain fell hard now, drumming on the roofs of the old Lada cars and splashing over the cracked sidewalks. The orange streetlights reflected in the puddles like a fragmented, trembling mirror, laying a path of liquid gold beneath our feet. The cold wind carried the smell of wet leaves, earth, and coal smoke from distant stoves.

I sang my poem, “Singing in the Rain” [I sang my own poem, matching the rhythm of that famous tune], projecting my voice with my usual dramatic flair while the rain soaked us both, verses celebrating our love against the black mountains and the autumn-whispering rooftops, the borscht and hot blinis warming our chests, the distant yurts and Issyk-Kul’s high lake, our marriage tested and blessed, our faith rising above stern faces, a love that never tires, God’s eyes in hers, the rain washing our brows as a blessing upon the just.

Anaïs burst into laughter that tried to turn into scolding but ended up as fresh peals of laughter echoing down the nearly empty avenue. Her wet hair clung to her cheeks and forehead, small drops shining on her lashes under the streetlights.

It was then, in the middle of that small, absurd domestic happiness in the rain, that her voice turned confessional:

“Petra told me your students complain that your English lacks clarity. She must have told them my accent is harmful to the English they need to perfect for their future careers in Indiana.”

I exclaimed, annoyed:

“I can just picture Magda asking them in class whether my English was as clear as any American’s.”

I knew perfectly well Anaïs was choosing this good-humored moment to tell me, trying to soften my

discomfort. Anaïs raised her voice above the noise of the rain and wind:

“I reminded Petra that both she and I have communicated with you without the slightest problem since the first day we arrived in Bishkek. But according to them, the problem is that, thanks to Spanish and French influences, you use more words of Latin origin than Saxon roots... As though etymological richness were a flaw, and lexical poverty an academic virtue.”

I conceded with a broad gesture, still laughing amid the raindrops:

“They might have a point, purely phonetically... though English itself has more French and Latin blood than Saxon, as you well know from our readings of Shakespeare and Gibbon.”

She nodded and added, gravely:

“That’s why they’re going to evaluate your class.”

Suddenly, that morning’s meeting with Arkadina took on its true meaning, like the last piece of a puzzle I’d been staring at without fully understanding.

The rain turned into a violent storm. The wind bent the poplar branches hard and lifted spirals of wet leaves that spun like little dark whirlwinds over the sidewalks. I wrapped my arm firmly around her shoulders, pulling her against my side, and we quickened our pace toward our building as I felt her body trembling against mine.

Reaching the apartment, Anaïs paused on the threshold, shook the water from her hair, and looked at me seriously:

“You need to be prepared. They know you’re very capable, and that’s exactly what unsettles them.”

I peeled off my damp clothes while reassuring her:

“I’m also an actor. I studied dramaturgy. This week I’ll teach my classes with a British accent.”

Anaïs looked at me for a moment with that particular expression of hers, a mix of disbelief and

complicity. As she undressed in front of the hallway mirror, I kissed her neck; she perfectly imitated the intonation of a middle-class Englishwoman and exclaimed: "Oh, dear!"

Bishkek, October 22, 2002

I worked all night on next semester's course plans, accompanied by the murmur of the Soviet radiators lining the avenue and the intermittent barking of some stray dog at the dump; I printed the documents at dawn on the old printer we had brought from Manchester, one that still worked with the stubborn dignity of appliances built to last.

I turned in the course plans at the rector's office at seven in the morning, under the startled gaze of Rector Gulmat's secretary, a small woman who at that hour had barely finished settling into her desk and who received the documents like someone accepting something unexpected she doesn't quite know how to classify; I then left copies at my own Faculty and at the English one, following protocol with the thoroughness of someone who knows that, in those offices, every omission can become an argument used against him.

Only at the break, from Laurica's own mouth, did I learn that the deadline to submit the course plans was that very day, at noon, meaning I had turned mine in five hours ahead of the deadline, contradicting the narrative Arkadina had already begun building around my supposed irresponsibility and my resistance to institutional processes.

"We've been asking around the Faculty about which courses you'll be teaching next semester," Laurica told me, with that precision of hers that left no room for ambiguous interpretation, "though we're told that, despite bothering you about it several times, you still hadn't submitted any proposal."

I told her it was a well-known problem among

writers: we always leave everything to the last minute, though in this case the last minute had turned out to be the first hour of dawn; I refrained from sharing with her the details of my conflicts with the Faculty, since Laurica was a valuable ally precisely because she stayed within that territory of discreet sympathy that didn't compromise her position within the system.

As she walked off with her always measured steps, I thought about Friday's evaluation with Narguiza and Utkin.

I wondered, with a mix of curiosity and apprehension, what surprise they would bring this time, what new variation they'd play on the same score of discrediting me they'd been rehearsing since my arrival.

Bishkek, October 24, 2002

A cream-colored recycled-paper flyer was published listing all the semester's elective courses; mine were five in total, split between two faculties, as though my academic presence were already uncomfortable enough to warrant spreading it across departments. Two in Communications: Audiovisual Screenwriting and Acting for Film; three in English: *The Devices of Agatha Christie*, Shakespeare's *Minor Tragedies*—*Titus Andronicus*, *Timon of Athens*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, plays conventional programs tend to skip—and *English Gothic*, with Mary Shelley, Bram Stoker, and Horace Walpole as the pillars of a course meant to show how literary horror requires expression even on the near-untouched summits of Central Asia.

That afternoon, from our apartment, I called Irina. The grey light of the Kyrgyz evening slanted in through the window, tinting the bare walls silver. I had put on a dark wool shirt to protect myself from the cold already seeping through the cracks, and held the receiver of the old Soviet telephone with a certain tension.

Irina, daughter of a famous Kyrgyz film director

whose name had never appeared in any of the specialized magazines I'd read in the West, answered in a dry voice.

I explained, patiently and enthusiastically, the philosophy behind the Film Club:

"I want to create a space where we screen films that question power and blind obedience. A place where people can openly debate things, after decades in which certain questions simply weren't asked out loud."

Before I could finish, she cut me off, sharply:

"How much money am I going to get?"

I paused for a second, taken aback by the bluntness of the question.

"Nothing," I answered, calmly. "There's no budget. The value lies in participation itself, in creating something meaningful..."

She didn't let me continue. I heard the dry click of the receiver on the other end.

She had hung up, leaving my sentence hanging in the air like a useless echo.

I sighed and dialed Annula's number instead.

Outside, the rain kept falling, fine and persistent, over Chuy Avenue. Annula answered on the third ring; her voice sounded calm, almost maternal.

I recounted precisely what had happened, weighing every word:

"Irina only asked how much money she'd get. When I told her there was no pay, she hung up without letting me finish."

I waited for her reaction. Against all my expectations, Annula answered with an equanimity that threw me off:

"There's no problem at all. I'll speak with Darixa myself. The Film Club will move forward, with or without the cooperation of that director, who apparently prefers money to culture."

Her calm comforted me. For a moment, the weight

I'd felt in my chest since the previous call disappeared.

"Thank you, Annula," I said, letting slip the constant workplace harassment I was suffering from Magda and the university. "Your understanding means a lot."

"Relax," she answered, gently. "Some people, like you and me, still believe in something more than just paying our monthly bills."

Bishkek, October 25, 2002

I walked into the classroom that Friday morning with the deliberate punctuality of someone who knows every detail will be watched and recorded; the room smelled of wet chalk and that peculiar mix of cheap perfume and wool clothing so characteristic of Kyrgyz classrooms during the season's first cold snap.

Narguiza and Dr. Utkin were already settled in the back, at the last desks, with the rehearsed naturalness of two health inspectors who'd arrived before the cook to inspect his own kitchen; Narguiza held an open notebook on the desk, pencil ready, prepared to transcribe any phrase worth analyzing; Utkin, by contrast, carried no writing instrument at all, since his memory was his tool and his gaze his method, and both were enough for what he had planned.

I preferred to believe, setting aside the paranoia Magda insisted on instilling into every one of my actions, that Narguiza, invariably sweet and kind with me, would be lenient about my teaching methods.

The students noticed the presence of our visiting inspectors immediately, with that almost animal sensitivity developed by those who have grown up in systems where being watched carries consequences; Irina, who since reading the essay on cinema had begun sitting in the front rows with an attentiveness I read as the start of a genuine intellectual transformation, asked me a question through the muscles around her eyes, one her lips kept shut.

Laurica reviewed her notes from the previous week with excessive concentration, like someone who needs to keep her hands busy to hide the tension running through her body.

I began the class with an English accent no one could question.

“What is news?”

There followed the reverential silence my unusual ideas always stirred up, my line of argument always contrary to what everyone, imperfectly, believed they already knew about news.

It was also true that one of my students was weighing his answer for the benefit of two strangers who, from the back of the room, would leave a record of his rhetorical sharpness, a note that might affect his end-of-degree evaluation for a scholarship trip to Indiana funded by the U.S. State Department.

I let the silence stretch a few seconds longer than expected, revealing the respect my knowledge had already earned, then offered an approximation of the notion I had chosen:

“News is a fact that someone decided was important; one that reveals the power, ideology, and concept of truth that a given social group or community determines to be urgent and necessary to know.”

I built the class around the concept of impartiality and the illusion of objectivity, with the deliberate calm of any of my classes; I steered the analysis toward the fundamental question of who decides what deserves to be told and what deserves to be buried in institutional silence, using examples from the Soviet press my students recognized from childhood, from the American press they knew through popular films, and from satellite television some wealthy parents had gotten hold of, and from García Márquez’s career as a journalist before he became a novelist.

I pronounced my words in rising and falling tones, mimicking an Oxford accent, applying my own theory on the colorful use of the voice in the actor’s craft, a subject I addressed in one of the chapters of my then-unpublished book, *Actuación Express*.

No student asked me to repeat what I’d said. If Utkin and his cronies wanted to accuse me of imposing a non-American accent on my students, let it at least be a British one, and let the ideas I imported be sui generis, provocative, once uttered and repeated by my rivals.

When I finished, Narguiza wrote something in her notebook with quick, precise movements that, from the podium, I chose to interpret as approving; Utkin watched me with a neutral expression and gave a minimal nod that could have meant assent, or simply the courtesy of someone who has already made up their mind but prefers not to reveal it ahead of time.

I refrained from asking, and let the moment close on its own.

At one in the afternoon, the meeting with Arkadina in the Faculty’s staff room was brief and disappointingly formal, with that aseptic tone of agreements reached because those who had questioned and accused an innocent man now realize all their suspicions were unfounded and their arguments made ridiculous.

I gathered, without much effort, that both Narguiza and Utkin had dismantled the already widespread opinion that my English was inferior to that of a Mexican immigrant who greets people, stammering, “my house is your house,” and says goodbye with the well-worn phrase, “hasta la vista!”

We agreed that, next semester, my courses would remain required, as though the previous weeks’ misunderstanding had never happened, as though no one had hinted or threatened anything, as though the department’s intrigues over my supposed inability to speak English were simply background noise accompanying

academic life anywhere in the world.

I signed the new agreement, printed with the spontaneity of someone who never suggested otherwise, with no explanation whatsoever, no apology, no acknowledgment that anything had been corrected at the last minute.

"I appreciate your work," I said.

"So do we," Arkadina answered, ambivalent, and, smiling, revealed those permanently sleepless eyes, which carried, for anyone who knew how to read them, a whole life devoted to formulating and retracting accusations.

Bishkek, October 26, 2002

The Film Club had been advertised all week in the local press, on two radio stations, and on the national television evening news, with a level of coverage I hadn't anticipated, one owed in part to Darixa's work, who, brushing aside the baseless rumors about my English, understood the value of an event that would make the University look good in the eyes of the State Department.

Our turnout exceeded every expectation we'd formulated in our planning meetings, and a line stretching several blocks down the snowy sidewalk preceded my arrival at the screening venue, people of every age holding their coats closed with both hands, speaking quietly among themselves, with that air of someone attending an event that promises to decode a hidden part of their own life.

After several negotiations with the theater's management, and thanks to one of Darixa's contacts with the venue's artistic director, we managed to screen *1984* on the stage of the Abdylas Malydybaev National Opera and Ballet Theater of Kyrgyzstan, a space that, during the Soviet era, had hosted the most lavish productions of socialist realism, and now received, on its worn red-velvet stage, the image of a dystopian future that, for many of those present, was also a recognizable past.

"We're at full capacity," Petra said, nervously. "Should we close the doors?"

"Let's seat them on the marble staircase," I proposed.

"And security?"

"We're not in Boston," I replied, entrusting our safety to God.

We let others stand at the back, against the golden columned wall, since the theater's capacity had filled within under an hour, and sending people back home would have been a cruelty none of us were willing to commit.

I climbed onto the stage and noticed Petra had vanished.

"She said she was going to the bathroom," Anaïs told me, beside me, taking her place out of marital solidarity, thereby fulfilling the Soviet protocols of formal introduction.

With no reason to question her absence, I took the microphone on the stage, before that crowd watching me with the expectant attention of people who don't know exactly what they're about to hear but sense it matters to them, and prepared to read what I had written in Russian several nights earlier, aware that in that room were people who had lived within the very system the film described, who would recognize every gesture, every slogan, every mechanism of control with the painful familiarity of someone seeing the exact texture of their own memory portrayed on a screen.

"George Orwell was a man who came to know, up close, the hypocrisy of the socialist system," I read slowly, in the measured voice of someone who trusts that words need not be shouted to reach those who must hear them. "He traveled as a volunteer to fight fascism in the Spanish Civil War, serving in the ranks of the POUM, the Trotskyist party that Stalinism hunted down with the same ferocity it hunted its declared enemies; he believed, with the generous faith of poets, that every member of the

world's communist parties was a person of good heart, someone who had chosen the cause of the oppressed for genuine reasons. Like so many others who came before and after him, Orwell never imagined that the socialist leaders sponsoring the Spanish rebellion were lying to him, that the revolution could betray its own children as easily as it betrayed its declared enemies, since betrayal is the favored instrument of those with no principles, only interests.

"What terrified him most about this new Sanhedrin that was Stalinism was the usurpation of language, because a society that calls a lie 'truth,' war 'peace,' and hunger 'abundance' has lost the very possibility of thought; it has destroyed the tool with which human beings communicate their doubts, and without doubt there is no thought, and without thought there is no dignity.

"His critical stance earned him a court-martial that accused him of insubordination; his cunning, however, saved him from being shot, once he understood in time that he was dealing with donkeys who preferred straw to the gold of truth, and that the only way out, against that kind of stubbornness, is writing, since books outlive their censors with a regularity that should worry tyrants far more than it generally does.

"Back in England, wounded and disillusioned but also clarified by the experience, as only someone who has seen the monster up close and survived to describe it can be, he wrote the novel whose film adaptation we're sharing tonight."

The first images, freshly arrived from the United States in a package Annula had arranged with her characteristic efficiency, were greeted with applause from an audience that had survived the nightmare now playing out on screen; when the characters got up at dawn to do their morning exercises before the telescreen, with that reflexive obedience of someone who no longer remembers

when they stopped choosing their own movements, several viewers laughed a nervous laugh and mimicked the raised-arm movements themselves, a gesture hovering between mockery and recognition.

When John Hurt, his face that of a man systematically erased from himself, recalled the war scenes—the bombings, the mutilated children, the endless propaganda that blurred allies and enemies into one—several people wept in the darkness of the theater. No one tried to hide it, perhaps because in that room everyone knew crying was the most eloquent form of understanding.

When the screen went dark and the theater lights slowly came back up, in that soft, golden glow that makes people look at one another with an intimacy the darkness had created, the audience erupted into shouts and applause that lasted several minutes, applause of a different quality than any perfunctory clapping; it was the recognition of something familiar, something lived, the strange relief of hearing named aloud a yoke carried for years; an accepted cross whose absurdity only now revealed itself so clearly, so publicly.

I watched Petra, now in the front row, take the podium with unusual pride to invite the audience to share comments and questions. I let her carry on in silence, understanding that her absence during my introduction to the film had been that of a skeptical professor toward an undertaking she now, in light of its great success, embraced wholeheartedly.

I introduced the next film to close the evening, *Belle de Jour*; for the first time in all my months in Bishkek, as the crowd filed toward the exit, talking loudly with an energy that felt new, I smiled at Kyrgyz society, my wife on my arm.

We were now, both of us, heralds of modernity, architects of a mirror illuminating the darkest corner of Kyrgyzstan's recent history.

Bishkek, October 27, 2002

We went to Dordoi Saturday morning, just as the duty-free market on the outskirts of the city was coming to life amid clouds of steam rising from the vendors' tea thermoses and the metallic clatter of tents opening one by one, like industrial flowers on the frozen ground.

Anaïs walked beside me with that concentration of hers, weighing every possibility before committing to any of them, and, after nearly two hours wandering the aisles between stalls of clothing, kitchenware, and dubious Chinese-made goods, we found a cowhide coat trimmed with synthetic fox-fur that suited her with that natural elegance of garments that seem to have been made for the person wearing them, rather than the other way around; it cost three hundred dollars, exactly everything we had left for the month, and I bought it by requesting a cash advance on my credit card, so as not to touch the bills we kept with the same care shipwreck survivors ration their fresh water.

Back at the housing complex, I took several photographs with the digital camera we'd brought from Manchester, portraits of Anaïs in her new coat against the bare trees and the building's Soviet façade, which we sent that same afternoon to relatives and friends scattered across Besançon, Bogotá, and Bucaramanga.

Anaïs was very happy, with that specific, unaffected happiness of someone who has received something unexpected and recognizes it as a gesture of love rather than merely an object.

Checking the afternoon's emails, I read that Darixa was requesting copies of all my videos and films, since the following Thursday they were organizing an evening for the university community to get to know my film work, convinced it would prove both entertaining and instructive for everyone; I had no doubt it was yet another test of my abilities, another stage set up to evaluate not my knowledge this time, but my reaction to a potentially hostile audience,

in the same way the International Communication lecture had been a testing ground disguised as an academic celebration.

Bishkek, October 28, 2002

I learned that afternoon, from Gulmira's own mouth, as we crossed the long, poorly lit Faculty corridor amid students walking with their heads down, dragging worn backpacks and threadbare coats. The grey linoleum floor, cracked with age, faintly reflected the light of the flickering fluorescent tubes overhead.

"Arthur Holmes is in Bishkek," Gulmira said, in her light, cautious tone, adjusting the grey wool scarf around her neck, worn over a brown sweater too large for her.

The name fell between us like a stone into a still pond.

"He was at the lunch Arkadina organized this morning with all the faculty," she went on, lowering her voice a bit. "During the toast he asked about you, and Magda remarked, with her usual sourness, that she didn't understand why you hadn't attended."

I was wearing a black wool jacket and a dark scarf, still damp from the morning's rain.

"That's a lie," I answered, without lowering my voice. "No one told me and no one invited me, as the lady who organized that lunch knows perfectly well."

Gulmira looked at me with a well-rehearsed expression of bewilderment, tilting her head to the left in a sign of surrender, her beautiful round, Asian, olive-skinned face, neatly made up like a flower rising from a collar of green silk petals, deformed only slightly by a forehead drawn tight in youthful effort.

"Arkadina said she called you several times at the apartment, in front of Holmes," she told me.

I smiled, my indignation contained, and walked into the offices without answering.

Saikal, Arkadina's secretary, received me sitting behind her metal desk, her blonde hair piled up in an onion-shaped bun, typing away with mechanical efficiency on her old Soviet computer. She wore a navy cardigan over a white high-collared blouse, and her glasses hung from a thin gold chain.

"We missed you at lunch," she said, without looking up much.

"Where's Mr. Holmes?" I asked, directly.

She lowered her glasses with a gesture of calculated reproach.

"Jeff couldn't believe your rudeness. Holmes is currently in class with Dean Arkadina."

I left without saying goodbye and walked through the empty classrooms, wooden chairs lined up in front of blackboards still covered in unerased white chalk. In the second-floor hallway, beneath the yellowish light, I ran into Mirbek, carrying a black folder under his arm, his synthetic leather jacket creaking as he walked.

"Why wasn't I told about Arthur Holmes's arrival?" I asked. "Isn't it your job, Mirbek, to keep us informed about what's scheduled at this university?"

"Arkadina told us she was going to call you," he answered, with a perfectly rehearsed look of surprise. "Didn't she invite you to this morning's lunch?"

"She knows perfectly well I'm never home in the mornings. My classes start early, and I walk almost forty minutes from the apartment."

Mirbek smiled, a rehearsed tone in his voice.

"Right now they're giving him a tour of the outskirts. Zernebog hired a bus for faculty and students."

"Zernebog?" I asked, incredulous. "He never comes to the University, and when he does show up, it's only to negotiate his next absence."

Later, in Vladimir's taxi—an old white Lada with worn cloth seats and the smell of cold cigarettes—I

mentally prepared for my next lecture while organizing what I would say to Holmes.

Around five-thirty, from our apartment with its peeling beige walls and heavy mustard-colored curtains—that aged yellow that seemed to have absorbed decades of Soviet smoke—I dialed the Hyatt Hotel's number and asked for room 913. The very contrast of the gesture struck me as telling: on one side, our provisional, almost exiled space; on the other, the pristine enclave of international power, with its soundproof carpets and elevators that never stopped between floors.

After a brief pause, interrupted by the neutral hum of the line and the muffled sound of footsteps on carpet, a man's voice answered.

"Arthur," I said, with a cordiality I myself knew to be strategic, "it's Marco. I'd like us to meet, if possible."

There was a slight shift in his breathing, as though he were adjusting the phone between his shoulder and cheek, or, rather, adjusting some version of himself before answering.

"Marco," he repeated, and in his tone there was neither enthusiasm nor hostility, only that trained neutrality of someone who manages conflicts without becoming entangled in them. "I already spoke with your dean today, and tomorrow, first thing, I leave for Samarkand."

The sentence wasn't an outright refusal, but it was a fence: time as excuse, schedule as wall.

"No one told me you were arriving," I noted, weighing every word. "I have a couple of questions I'd like to ask you."

There was a brief silence on the other end, not one of hesitation, but of calculation. When he spoke again, his voice had hardened just slightly:

"Speak with Darixa or with Annula," he cut in, with an administrative firmness. "They have all the information you need."

It was the first time he had spoken their names as

though drawing a border. Not “they can help you,” not “they’ll fill you in”: they have all the information. His information, I understood, no longer circulated freely, as he had led me to believe in Liverpool, in front of the Cathedral of the Virgin Mary; it still did, perhaps, among friends, relatives, and subordinates he valued; for strangers, rivals, and enemies like me, that information was denied or, if the law required it, administered.

I decided then to push him toward a greater overreach, a clearer humiliation, shifting the axis of the conversation:

“I’m exploring new job opportunities in England. Would you be willing to write me a letter of recommendation?”

I knew the request was untimely. That was exactly why I made it, to see what it would reveal about his true map of power.

“That’s impossible for me,” he declared, without hesitation. “The only one able to guarantee such a document is your direct supervisor, Arkadina Morozov.”

He didn’t say “should” or “would be more appropriate.” He said “impossible.” The impossibility, in that context, was not a limitation but a personal whim.

“Your sister-in-law?” I said, knowing it would offend him.

A dense silence followed, filled with mental calculations. I could picture him, in that Hyatt room, standing beside a floor lamp, his face slightly tilted, weighing my question and the consequences of answering it with anger or irony.

“Explain yourself,” he finally demanded, in a controlled voice that had lost all pretense of courtesy.

I recognized I had gone too far, but I did not retreat; I only modulated my tone:

“Since I arrived in this city, I’ve noticed she wields an influence that goes beyond her formal academic role.”

It wasn’t an accusation, but something more dangerous: an observation.

Holmes answered after the briefest of pauses, like someone choosing every word not for what it says, but for what it denies:

“She has told me nothing about you. And I hold no direct family relationship with your dean.”

The precision of “direct family” rang out like a legal clause, a careful boundary. I was no longer speaking with an academic, but with a man trained in the diplomacy of nuance, where truth can be fragmented, or relativized.

“True, she isn’t legally part of your immediate family,” I sighed, almost to myself. “I suppose American law draws such distinctions with great rigor.”

He didn’t answer, exactly as I expected; I had struck the precise point, his complicity and his veiled nepotism, of which I was the victim, as Saint John the Baptist once was, this time Herod satisfying the bloodlust of the calculating Arkadina.

“Good night to you,” he said, finally, with a haste that no longer sought merely to end the conversation, but to shut down any possibility of continuing it.

The line fell silent; I stood a moment with the receiver in my hand, listening to that void as eloquent as any insult. I hadn’t gotten any concrete answer, and yet the picture had become clear: the invisible hierarchy, the restricted flow of information, the network of loyalties, all had been orchestrated against me with an almost legal precision.

When will they tire of attacking me? I asked myself, in the candid hope that one of them might repent of so much lying and injustice against me. But had they had it, with the dean who had fallen poisoned at their feet? Had Stalin had it, reading Gorky’s novels or watching the reels of *Ivan the Terrible*?

Arthur Holmes—with his neutral voice, his impeccable schedule, and his categorical impossibilities—

had sacrificed his own incidental integrity in order to remain part of the nepotistic, privileged machinery of that post-Soviet empire.

At that moment Anaïs walked into the apartment, bringing with her the cold, damp air from outside. She wore her quilted wine-colored coat, cinched at the waist with a black belt, and a cream wool scarf covering half her face. Her chestnut hair had grown damp with the drizzle and clung slightly to her cheeks, flushed from the cold. Whitney came in right behind her, a navy sports bag slung over her shoulder, dressed in a light grey American-brand tracksuit that clashed with the Soviet surroundings, her blonde hair pulled into a high ponytail.

"Shall we go to the pool?" they asked, almost in unison.

I nodded, making a visible effort to seem cheerful, though the weight of my conversation with Holmes still pressed on my chest.

The Soviet pool was almost empty at that hour. The sharp smell of cheap chlorine hung in the warm, humid air. The white tiled walls, chipped in several places, reflected the greenish glow of the fluorescent lights. The filtration system emitted a constant metallic hum they'd never quite managed to fix. I took off my black wool jacket and shirt, staying in my black swimsuit. Anaïs wore a striking red bikini that set off her elegant, French figure. Whitney, on the other hand, beneath her mushroom-shaped afro, wore a simple black one-piece under a short white robe that dissolved against her pale skin.

We swam between the lanes marked off by worn ropes. The water was warm but smelled strongly of chemicals. As I swam laps, I sensed Anaïs watching me; she had already noticed my unease.

On the way home, in Vladimir's taxi—that same white Lada with worn cloth seats and the smell of cold cigarettes soaked into the whole interior—Anaïs sat beside

me in the back seat. Her hair, still damp, hung loose over her shoulders, a grey sweatshirt pulled over her swimsuit. She rested her head on my shoulder.

"Marco has a beautiful back," she said suddenly, warmly, naturally, speaking to Whitney.

"Not as attractive as yours," Whitney snapped, expecting easy agreement.

"But look at that lovely back he has," Anaïs insisted, kissing my cheek tenderly.

Through the rearview mirror I saw Whitney's baffled expression; she hadn't expected that remark. The Southerner processed the line quickly and regained control of the conversation with her usual light but sharp tone:

"In the Anthropology Department, they admire everything that comes from France: the wine, the makeup, the fashion, the Chanel and Dior perfumes... It's only natural that they'd want to get to know Anaïs for her manners."

Anaïs answered with French composure:

"That's because they don't know the manners of my Colombian Prince."

Whitney's face hardened instantly. She turned to look out the window, where passersby moved hunched under the persistent rain along Chuy Avenue, dark coats, hurried steps.

Then, in a voice meant to sound casual but heavy with tension, she asked:

"How's your mother, Anaïs? Still complaining that her husband won't take her to France for Christmas?"

I watched, through the mirror, Anaïs's face receive the blow with a brief, controlled expression. I gave her a wink to reassure her, not noticing Whitney's watchful eye.

Getting out of the taxi in front of her building, Whitney kissed Anaïs on the cheek with an exaggerated smile. Then she turned to me. Her expression changed entirely: her eyes filled with an energy that mixed rage and humiliation.

"You planned all of this!" she muttered, baring her gold-capped teeth. "'Colombian Prince'! Ha!"

Anaïs was already walking toward the building's entrance, not listening. I stayed facing Whitney and told her, coldly calm:

"It was Anaïs who got sick of your act long before it came to this. We won't be coming back to the pool with you."

"We'll see who she listens to!" she snapped, defiantly, before turning her back and walking off briskly.

I caught up with Anaïs in the building's lobby, where the yellow light of a bare bulb lit the institutional green-painted walls. I told her everything that had happened, in full detail.

"Does Whitney think she's married to me?" she asked, indignant, as we climbed the stairs. "How dare she defy us like that?"

Walking into the apartment, the phone was ringing insistently. Anaïs got there first and answered:

"Oui... She listened for a few seconds and then spoke firmly: I love my Marquis. There's nothing more to say. Please leave us alone. And no, we won't be going back to the pool with you."

She hung up, resolutely.

"Did she upset you?" I asked.

"She wanted to know what you'd said about her," Anaïs sighed, taking off her sweatshirt. "And then she started crying, saying you'd insulted her."

"Petra was right," I murmured. "She's a bitter woman."

Anaïs's expression hardened.

"I have no doubt she'll apologize... but it's too late now."

Walking into the apartment, the phone had rung with an insistence impossible to ignore. The yellowish light of the floor lamp lit the living room's heavy Soviet

furniture, the worn brown velvet sofa, and the thick mustard-colored curtains that smelled faintly of damp. Anaïs, still with damp hair and wearing only her grey sweatshirt over her black swimsuit, stepped forward and picked up the receiver.

I heard her speak in a clear, firm voice:

"Oui... I love my Marquis. There's nothing more to say about it. Please leave us alone. And no, we won't be going back to the pool with you."

She hung up with a decisiveness that left no room for reply.

"What did she say?" I asked, taking off my black wool jacket, still damp with rain.

"She asked what you'd told her about her," Anaïs sighed, running a hand through her wet hair. "And then she started crying, saying you'd insulted her, as though people who behave badly also had the privilege of being the victims of whoever points out their bad behavior."

"Petra was right," I murmured, recalling the warnings that had reached us for weeks, from various fronts, about that friendship.

Anaïs sank onto the old brown sofa, her expression hardening.

"I have no doubt she'll apologize," she declared, her voice tired but resolved, "but it's too late."

"Not with me," I replied, walking toward the window. Outside, the rain kept falling on Chuy Avenue, making the asphalt gleam beneath the orange streetlamps.

The hierarchy of pedigree Whitney cultivated was an inheritance from the Southern slave system, with white Protestants at the top, below them mulattoes like her, then Black people, then Asians like the humiliated Derogan, and, in the stratosphere, Colombians, and beyond even that, the unborn Peruvians she suffered so much over; the incredible thing is that she'd believed she could share a bubble with Anaïs. No doubt she now blamed me, loudly, for having burst her soap bubble from the front seat of a

Soviet taxi, provoking her unstable accomplice into an unwanted marital tribute.

That small crack left her without a script, exposed as one more byproduct of the neocolonial prejudices no one at this institution dares to name out loud... because everyone, in one way or another, benefits from them.

19. The Attacks

*Everywhere, we see Kant suspend all spontaneity,
as though it were a mere infra-life, and begin to live instead
through that second activity which is reflexivity*

Ortega y Gasset

Bishkek, October 29, 2002

Yesterday, in my Kyrgyz class, Jamilya asked about my daily habits; when I told her that, upon getting up at six in the morning, I would put on a robe and go out to buy bread and milk on the street, she was thoroughly surprised.

"Don't you exercise?" she asked me, in Russian.

I shook my head, puzzled.

"I saw the film *1984*," she told me, "and in it you can see how Big Brother worries about the health of every citizen in his society."

"And?" I asked, already suspecting where her reading of the film was headed.

"You Westerners criticize our system of government," she went on, "which is based on imposing whatever doctors and professionals consider best for our wellbeing; you believe independence and freedom are the most valuable things, but you fail to notice that, unless one has trained oneself in every field of human knowledge, that freedom only leads to idleness, vice, and illness."

"Those are solid arguments," I conceded, "but what Big Brother does is treat his subjects as though they were pets, and the one thing that truly makes us human is the freedom to decide our own fate, Jamilya. In one of my stories, the Neanderthal men choose to die rather than become murderers, as we, *Homo sapiens*, are in potential; that story echoes the grim fate of the Maya, who sacrificed themselves to the goddess of suicide rather than be enslaved by the Aztecs, or of the Jews who died at Masada.

I don't praise such conduct, but it stands as living proof of freedom, just as Bolívar's journey to Bogotá after the Convention of Ocaña was, or Lincoln's trip to the theater to see a play about Julius Caesar, or Julius Caesar's own walk to the Capitol before falling victim to the attack that would eventually claim his life; the greatest tragedy isn't death, but the surrender of our will."

"Obesity can kill you," she insisted.

"Haven't you known athletes who die, inexplicably, in the prime of their lives?" I asked. "Didn't Buddha die of indigestion, obese, at the age of eighty?"

"You're denying the obvious," she replied. "Your wife does go to the gym."

"It's true I don't exercise when I get up," I conceded, "but I walk three kilometers home from the university."

Jamilya nodded, not entirely convinced.

"And what would happen if your wife hit it off with another gym member?" she pressed. "Leaving a woman alone among athletes is a risk."

I fell silent, unable to counter her reasoning. Would my wife be capable of leaving me for a more muscular body? I wondered, remembering that this had been precisely the reason Marlon Brando's wife takes a lover in *Last Tango in Paris*.

Jamilya, sensing she'd touched a nerve, smiled and resumed our Kyrgyz lesson.

Bishkek, October 30, 2002

José invited me that morning to go visit Uriel, his Ecuadorian indigenous friend, and Heidi, his German wife.

"I've told them so much about you and your adventures," he said, "that they're starting to think I have an imaginary friend."

I practiced Mozart's Turkish March in my piano lesson with Anaïs; at seven sharp we took Vladimir's taxi

toward the Alamedin neighborhood.

We turned onto Manas Street and stopped in front of an electric gate; I leaned out the window and waved in greeting, and, after hearing several voices in Spanish come through a speaker, the aluminum panels rose ceremonially. We entered a wide courtyard ringed with lush willows; we parked next to a Porsche, a four-door Audi SUV, and a BMW. We got out and were welcomed by José, who, holding a martini glass, introduced us to Uriel and Heidi.

"So we have a representative of Colombia here in these mountains?" Uriel asked me, with a wide smile.

Uriel was a short, sturdy man; he hugged me and I felt his metal-hard muscles. Heidi greeted me in perfect Spanish, and I answered in German. Tatiana then came over from the mansion's entrance and embraced us with the kind of effusiveness Soviets tend to avoid in public. Two slight children, about ten and eleven, appeared from a garden, ran up and hugged Heidi, before greeting us in French.

"These are Welter and Hermann," Uriel said. "You could ask them something in Russian now, Marco."

"Вам нравится жить в Бишкеке?" I said.

The children laughed and ran off back toward the house without answering.

"They don't like it when we make them speak every language they know," Heidi sighed.

Heidi was a thin woman, with a prominent nose and sharp, bulging eyes; I immediately imagined her character and her history: scorned as a child for her plainness, Heidi had found refuge in her studies. Her perfect command of Spanish and English earned her a shot at a diplomatic post, which she secured after graduating in political studies; her diligence never quite matched her disillusionment with the lies of the civilized world, so she often longed to retreat to a convent, or to some indigenous village in South America or Africa. Finally, in Ecuador, she met a restless, rootless adventurer who captivated her, and

whom she married. Together they had built a cosmopolitan world for their children, carrying it from continent to continent, with the approval of a caste that applauded intercultural marriages.

They then led us into a house with a spacious wood-paneled living room, ringed by large windows overlooking a pool and a play area to one side. Climbing three steps led to a second, equally spacious lounge, with plush leather sofas and a bar tended by a young Kyrgyz man dressed in tails, purple gloves and shirt, and trousers striped in vertical purple and black lines.

"What'll you have?" the young man asked me, in English.

"A whisky..."

"Chivas?"

I nodded, smiling. An elderly Slavic maid came in and offered us caviar; behind her stretched a fifteen-square-meter mural, in which a naked native man, crowned with branches, his penis tied to a liana belt, bow and arrow slung across his back, posed menacingly beside a river, before an exquisitely lush jungle.

Anaïs, with that innocence that so captivated me, asked who the native man in the picture was.

José and Tatiana laughed in unison.

"It's Uriel!" I exclaimed.

"Impossible!" Anaïs answered, opening her mouth in that deliberate way French women do when they want to show a pleasant surprise.

"The real question," I said, smiling, "is how a king of the Amazon came to marry a German woman and end up living in Bishkek."

"So you know what that crown represents!" Uriel laughed, pleased.

"I was the ambassador's secretary," Heidi answered, "and I had information that they were going to log that part of the Amazon; I went out there myself and

urged Uriel to start a legal case to stop his habitat from being destroyed by the mining companies extracting gold and coltan."

"Impressive," Anaïs said.

"But before we go on, let's offer the ladies something."

"What would you like?" Uriel nodded, enthusiastically. "A martini? A mojito?"

Tatiana and Anaïs exchanged glances and each asked for a margarita.

"I'll have another martini," José cut in, setting his glass down on the bar table.

"What a romantic story!" Anaïs exclaimed. "Did you win the case?"

"After two years of litigation," Uriel nodded. "I had to leave my tribe to fight the case in Quito; without Heidi, I couldn't have done much."

"I can just picture the two of you walking the halls of power in Ecuador," Tatiana said. "No one would have dared challenge an alliance between Germany and the Amazon."

"Not openly," Heidi replied.

"And it was through that international cooperation that you fell in love," I remarked.

"Let's say so," Heidi smiled.

We moved on to dinner, the children joining us; Welter was more talkative than Hermann, but both spoke English, Spanish, French, German, Russian, Japanese, Chinese, Quechua, and Kyrgyz with a fluency that was simply out of our reach. After dinner Heidi took the ladies aside, near the pool, and Uriel led us up a spiral staircase to a terrace on the third floor of the house, from which we could see a beautiful view of Bishkek; several columns held up hammocks and net swings, and Uriel gestured for us to lie down in them. I chose the one facing the southern side of the city, and sighed, searching for the red light illuminating the statues of Marx and Engels, in front of the

University where I fought my battles.

The bartender brought us a tray of ice and bottles.

"Do you like living here?" I asked him again.

"I'm not sure," he said, settling into his hammock with feline agility. "I miss my life with my tribe."

"Calmer, I suppose?" I nodded.

"Back there we never worried about tomorrow," he said, his eyes lighting up. "We spent our days playing and making love, and when we needed food, we went out to find it, and sooner or later we did. Here everyone lives worried; they believe what they have won't be enough to last them till next month."

"It's the burden imposed by the great powers," José cut in, sighing.

"And not only that," I said. "Civilization advances with technological tools that demand to be used, and those of us who don't use them become second-class citizens. South America's indigenous tribes live under threat from multinational employees who can destroy them with a single mining excavation; if your tribes don't modernize to exploit their own resources, someone else will do it for you, sooner or later."

"That's exactly what I'd always thought," Uriel nodded, nostalgically, "but I'd never been able to put it into words; I'm a man of the past."

"I wouldn't say that," José said, smiling. "Don't you drive the cars downstairs?"

"How about we go for a spin?" Uriel asked, setting his melancholy aside.

We climbed into the three-seat Porsche and sped through the city; José insisted on giving me the front passenger seat, so I got to enjoy the thrill of speed. The buildings' lights blurred into a yellow streak; the traffic lights ticked by with the frequency of a musical beat; the city, seen from that German machine, felt like a movie set rather than a labyrinth where one could be run down by a

Minotaur in the shape of a dark-windowed van.

"And the police?" I asked.

"They don't bother diplomatic cars," Uriel exclaimed, taking a corner with a screech of tires.

We laughed and passed several cars, until we caught up with a white van that decided to keep pace with us in the next lane; behind its wheel, in the flickering light of the streetlamps, I recognized Zernebog's face. My absent student stared at me for a few moments, with an expression I couldn't quite read—surprise? recognition? something else?—until our horn forced him to brake suddenly for a slower-moving Nissan. Uriel left him behind and made a U-turn further ahead; on our way back, I saw Zernebog shaking hands with the Nissan's owner, whose rear bumper now bore a fresh dent.

"That idiot crashed because he was too busy watching everyone else," José remarked, laughing.

Bishkek, November 1, 2002

My class on Media in Conflict was evaluated, as I had been warned, by Dr. Utkin and Narguiza; the topic was neocolonialism in the media. Irina dug up words from classical English out of her dictionary to challenge my ideas, asking, in stilted phrasing, what such precepts might beget, and whether I could tailor a solution for such a matter.

Even so, the speed of my answers left her increasingly timid. At one point she glanced at Dr. Utkin, as though searching for a signal, but the old fox ignored her, aware I would not hesitate to expose his complicity.

Leo cut in to ask me whether those who wanted to free third-world citizens from American and European influence weren't simply swimming against the current.

"In what area of science," I asked him, "have the United States or Europe ever excelled without the collaboration or coordination of other cultures?"

"In science," Irina said, her eyes lighting up.

"Wasn't it the Chinese and the Hindus who provided all the mathematics their calculations rest on?" I replied.

"In fashion," Laurica cut in.

"Has France ever replaced the majesty of Chinese silk, or does it strive endlessly to imitate it with synthetic materials?"

"In beauty, you chose France," Dr. Utkin remarked, and a student in the back row let out a nervous laugh that everyone, myself included, joined in.

"Umberto Eco has promised to publish a book on the subject," I replied, "but ever since Deleuze and Guattari we've known that beauty is conditioned by desire. Do I desire a blonde, blue-eyed woman because she resembles the angel portraits in my church, or because she resembles the American actress from the TV show I watched every Friday night?"

"I am beautiful," Irina replied, "and far more desired than if I were an overweight woman from China."

The class laughed together, and Irina twisted her lips into a triumphant smile; only I noticed Narguiza's discomfort, her arms crossed as though restraining herself from applauding. I gathered that, unlike her Kyrgyz compatriots, she did not deny what she saw in the mirror and, contrary to her upbringing, felt more identified with Chinese features than with Slavic ones.

"For Rubens and other painters, heavyset women were preferable," I countered, "and heavyset men too; they fulfilled the desire for prosperity and good health in an age of scarcity. Besides, you may know that hundreds of Americans came home married to Vietnamese women after the Vietnam War; the hatred instilled in them was so obsessive that they ended up desiring the very women of their enemies, a fine example of the paths desire takes: water flowing along whatever channels we build for it, and the falls we subject it to."

"But you love a Frenchwoman," Leo insisted, "and she's slender; some compare her to Catherine Deneuve."

"I saw *Belle de Jour* when I was nineteen," I nodded. "How pleasant it is when one falls in love with one of the heroines of one's favorite films."

The students laughed.

"But let's rise to reality," I said, quoting Marx. "Beauty is one of the primary attractions between men and women, and, as Schopenhauer pointed out, its vessel is youth. Every flower is beautiful when it blooms, and every flower is scorned once it withers; but is love among human beings reducible to beauty alone? Let us not forget Rimbaud's lines, which speak of the poet seating Beauty upon his knees one evening, only to find her bitter, and to curse her for it."

"Verses written by a sensitive soul barely seventeen years old," I continued. "In fact, there are five great attractions in life: beauty, power, money, fame, and knowledge. Each person chooses a standpoint that is irreconcilable with the others; those who exalt beauty criticize the young woman who falls for a powerful man, just as those who criticize certain students' affairs with older Americans do. Those who champion money, like Kant, are horrified when a bright young man marries a maiden simply because she is beautiful, and the young man who marries a shrewd, intelligent widow, as Disraeli did in England, is criticized by those who assume youth must be spent chasing money or power; finally, those who cultivate wisdom look with pity upon those matches based solely on beauty, that is, on physical attraction between perfect bodies."

"What's the problem with being attractive?" Irina replied.

"On a certain occasion," I answered, "a very handsome Roman traveled to Athens to consult the most renowned philosopher of his generation; he had a single question: 'Master, should I marry or not?' The philosopher

looked at him with pity and said: 'If you marry a beautiful woman, she will be unfaithful to you, and if you marry a wise, noble, and industrious woman, you will be unfaithful to her.' Beauty, dear Irina, borders on infidelity the same way fire borders on conflagration."

"Is that why your stomach isn't flat?" Irina asked, and the students laughed.

"I promise it will be," I joked.

"So then," Leo pressed, "what do you love about your wife? Don't tell me Anaïs's greatest attraction is her intelligence."

A murmur ran through the classroom; this time I did not celebrate the joke.

"Or did he marry her to get French citizenship?" Irina murmured to Laurica, barely audibly.

"I love the devotion she shows for my intelligence," I answered, after a brief pause, "just as she loves my intelligence itself."

"Your own words," Utkin murmured.

"The line isn't mine," I replied, "it's Swedenborg's, and note that in no way am I exalting my own intelligence the way a megalomaniac would. Love is not subject to the values of competition, but to taste; that is why the most handsome or most intelligent men are not necessarily the most loved by women, just as not everyone admires the peacock's beauty; some women prefer canaries, or geese. What wins a man a woman's devotion is his faithfulness to the efforts he makes, through his intelligence, to give her and their children the best life possible."

"Swedenborg was refuted by Kant," Dr. Utkin grumbled, flaunting his erudition.

"Not entirely," I nodded. "In fact, Kant plagiarized several of his ideas, or revelations."

"For instance?"

"Kant asserts that time and space are the universal categories of our understanding; Swedenborg holds that

their absence is the requirement for entering the world of the dead. Kant's construction, by way of negation, is quite evident."

Dr. Utkin twisted his lips in disbelief; I continued my lecture under his furious gaze.

"I know I am questioning one of the pillars of modernity," I went on, "and you'll wonder who this man is to criticize Kant; but let us not forget that, in Kant's own century, there were those who wondered who he was to question metaphysicians like Wolff. Knowledge can be understood in two ways: as something stable to be learned, or as something unstable to be investigated, and it is precisely there that the difference between third-world and first-world education lies."

The bell signaled the end of class, and Utkin left without saying goodbye; Narguiza, however, stayed seated a moment longer, taking notes with a slowness that was reflective rather than merely professional. She got up and came over to me, a puzzled look on her face.

"Do you think anyone in the West would find me beautiful?" she asked, her voice trembling, her fingers toying with the edge of her purple notebook as though seeking comfort from the paper.

"Of course!" I assured her, smiling. "There are thousands of men drawn to women with Asian features."

"Even the petite ones?" she asked, blushing, and lowered her head with a shyness I hadn't seen in her before.

"I'd recommend you read the *Libro de Buen Amor* by the Archpriest of Hita," I answered. "In it you'll find several elegies to small women. I remember a few of the lines: that the lark is small, and small the nightingale, and yet they sing sweeter than any larger bird; that a woman, when she is small, is all the better for it, sweeter in love than sugar or flower."

Narguiza laughed, covering her lips with her purple notebook, and walked off down the hallway with a

lightness I hadn't seen in her before.

That afternoon we screened *Belle de Jour* before an audience that overflowed the Theater's capacity; as the week before, I introduced Luis Buñuel's film, this time linking it to Soviet-era habits.

"Does a woman have the freedom to be unfaithful to her husband?" I asked, in Russian, before a stunned audience.

Anaïs and Petra watched me, fearful of the crowd's reaction, from the front row; someone in the third row coughed, a dry, drawn-out sound no one echoed.

"We know she does," I continued.

A murmur of disapproval spread among those present; I raised my hand for silence.

"Whether she acts rightly or wrongly," I went on, "is not our business, any more than it was Tolstoy's when he portrayed Anna Karenina's infidelity. Art, unlike the law, does not judge human beings; its task is understanding. And that is the question Luis Buñuel raises in *Belle de Jour*: do we husbands understand our wives, or do we judge them? We say we love them, but faced with infidelity, will we prove that our love goes beyond good and evil, as a mother's love does for her children, or will we shatter the glass of love according to the protocol our patriarchal society imposes on us? Better still: does a betrayed husband's fury spring from his own inner feeling, or is it a conditioned reflex, born of the fear that society will mock him for his leniency or his understanding?"

A white-haired woman in the sixth row nodded so vigorously her felt hat nearly fell off; her neighbor, a thick-mustached man, frowned and crossed his arms over his chest.

"Every young man knows the weakness of the flesh," I went on, "but patriarchal society is reluctant to grant women that same weakness. Buñuel shows that love need not necessarily be tied to sexuality; Séverine is, in fact,

forgiven by her husband once he learns she has secretly been working as a prostitute.

"You may wonder why divorce is so common in the West; *Belle de Jour* sheds light on this very issue. When a modern man or woman feels drawn to someone outside their relationship, they understand that divorce is the wisest course. Jealous dramas and tragedies of stabbed adulterers already belong to the past.

"Now that Bishkek is a society open to the world, it is to be hoped that respect for women will allow them not only to divorce, but also to renounce a husband who mistreats or violates them.

"And there is a deeper political message here: if we can rebuild our family relationships based on what we come to know of our relatives' vices, we can also rebuild the structures that govern us based on what we come to know of their dishonesty and inefficiency."

I gave the signal to the projectionist, and the film began amid the crowd's timid applause; as the film played on, the applause grew, until it became deafening, especially at the scene where Séverine rejects her husband's friend, who had tried to seduce her.

At the end of the screening, the ovation over the closing credits lasted several minutes; Petra then took the floor to deliver a feminist speech on loneliness within Western marriage, but her voice was lost amid the bustle of an audience already preparing to leave.

Bishkek, November 3, 2002

That weekend we were taken back to Aurora, by the idyllic Lake Issyk-Kul; the trees stood bare after the first snowfall, and we took photos of ourselves in our fur coats. Roberto, a Spaniard, had been staying at the sanatorium for a night and came up to us at dinnertime: tall, young, and sturdy, with thick, curly hair, bushy eyebrows, and an iron jaw, wearing a heavy grey Adidas tracksuit.

"What sport did you come here for?" he asked, examining my physique with skepticism. "I see you're a bit out of shape."

I explained, courteously, that we were international academics and that physical exercise ranked at the bottom of my list of priorities.

"I'm recruiting foreigners for my next trip through the mountains," he said, not registering my words. "I've been at this hotel two days already, and I'm going crazy only being able to exercise in the pool."

"Anaïs is a great athlete," I replied. "She was part of the French Olympic rowing team."

"Unfortunately there are no navigable rivers here," Anaïs said.

"You're," Roberto stammered, "from which country?"

"France."

"And don't you like skiing?" Roberto smiled, presumptuously.

"I love it."

"Like everyone from the Alps," he ventured to guess.

"Actually," Anaïs corrected him, "I'm from Jura."

"Close enough," Roberto smiled. "In February we've got a ski trip planned to Ala-Archa; are you interested?"

"Of course," Anaïs said.

I looked at her, somewhat confused; we never went anywhere apart, and Anaïs knew I didn't ski; my preference for reading and Anaïs's own taste for extreme sports had, from the beginning, been a source of friction between us.

"I'm sure Marco will enjoy learning to ski," Roberto replied, reading my mind.

Just then Annula stood up and tapped her wine glass with her spoon to announce we'd next be having a cinema session, featuring the films of a Colombian director

present in the room.

"Marco Noël Saint-André Ferreira!" she announced, loudly.

Only then did I realize how counterproductive that situation might turn out to be; those present applauded, and I stood up, wondering whether this was the right audience and the right occasion. Showing my philosophical films, not in a classroom but at a hotel, after several glasses of wine, on a Saturday night, could prove exasperating, if not tedious.

I first presented my fourteen-minute film, *po: Portrait of a Broken Wall Street Broker*, which plunged the audience into a reverent silence I couldn't quite tell was admiration or forced courtesy; the image of the man lying in bed, staring unblinking at the ceiling, ran on longer than the audience expected, and someone in the back row sighed. When it ended, over the credits, Dorian applauded from his seat; Petra joined in, and the room followed suit, without much enthusiasm. I then showed them the Direct Cinema sequence from *Manatí, Portrait of an Underdeveloped, Happy Town*, in which a stabbed man goes unattended by a nurse more concerned with getting an advertising sign installed in front of her clinic; the nurse, in the film, nudges the sign a couple of millimeters to the left while the wounded man lies dying at her feet. Someone in the third row—I didn't see who—let out a knowing laugh, treating it as a black-humor tragedy or a parody. I closed the evening with images from the Philadelphia Public Library, in which several children argue with their teachers about the right to read banned books; Dorian led the audience's applause, which wavered between skepticism and acceptance.

"What beautiful shots!" Dorian exclaimed. "I sincerely hope we can film that documentary about the students at their international forum: *Bishkek Transfer*."

"I've been thinking about it," I nodded, "and I'd like to have a team supporting me."

"In what way?" Dorian asked.

"I don't want to give up taking part in the debate itself."

"I'd be glad to handle the camera," he nodded, "if you'll teach me how to use it."

"I didn't understand the first film," Whitney cut in. "Why was that guy lying in bed the whole time?"

"It's a metaphor," I replied, "for the condition of the American man, whose whole world revolves around money."

The applause that hadn't celebrated *po* now burst out, cheering my answer; a wave of knowing, interpretive remarks swept the room; I had touched the forbidden subject of money, the very element granting the United States a hollow sense of superiority both in that retreat and at the university, and on the international stage.

"I don't want to imagine what your metaphor for us would look like," Whitney remarked, with premeditated displeasure.

Bishkek, November 5, 2002

Whitney hadn't called again; nor had she apologized. Her absence from the university's hallways spared us her bitter tirades.

Today we invited the small community of clergy from our church to dinner at home; I made lamb in sauce with roasted potatoes and rice. Contrary to every rule of decorum, they arrived with Whitney, whom we hadn't invited; both Anaïs and I received her cordially, as though nothing had happened since the day at the municipal pool. Isn't forgiveness the Christian thing to do?

"Is it true you find rent in England too expensive?" Father Peter suddenly asked. "How much were you paying?"

"About eight hundred fifty dollars a month," I answered, guilelessly, as was my habit whenever faced with

irony, impertinence, or provocation.

Out of the corner of my eye I noticed Whitney's triumphant expression; her fingers played with the rim of her wine glass, and her smile was that of someone who has prepared a question and now waits for the answer the way one waits for a trap to click shut.

"But that's what people pay in Rome, in Berlin, or in the United States for a decent apartment for a couple," Father Peter replied.

"Is that so?" I asked, rhetorically, considering that a rent of that amount was, in truth, lower than what we'd paid in London, but that, out of consideration for their lives as Germans once persecuted by Stalin, I hadn't wanted to flaunt our expenses in front of them.

"Yes!" Whitney, Edna, Rosemary, and Father Hans all nodded at once, revealing their words were the fruit of some earlier conversation.

"I must admit I didn't give him the real figure, out of respect for my wife," I replied. "Nothing irritates a Frenchman more than being asked about his salary, his expenses, his mortgage payments, his debts, or his medical bills."

"But you're not French," Whitney replied, her smile widening like a crack.

"Yes, he is," Anaïs cut in, with her charming smile, "and I don't understand why we're discussing our expenses in England at all; Marco confused dollars with pounds sterling."

"I apologize," I nodded. "The rent we paid in Manchester was eight hundred fifty pounds a month, which comes out to about thirteen hundred dollars."

"Now that is expensive," Sister Rosemary nodded, blushing, and Whitney pressed her lips together so hard the corners of her mouth showed the strain; her triumph had dissolved into Anaïs's correction, and all that was left to her was a resigned, humiliating silence.

The mood turned sour; Father Hans cleared his

throat and asked about the lamb recipe, a change of subject so abrupt that everyone welcomed it with relief. I gathered that Whitney had made a generous contribution to the church, and had casually asked whether the Saint-Andrés had already made their annual contribution; that roundabout interrogation was a continuation of her questioning about our expenses in Kyrgyzstan.

For my part, I felt no guilt about not contributing to the church beyond the anonymous donations I left in the collection basket on Sundays; our finances were precarious, and, unlike Whitney, we didn't receive per diems for giving improvised lectures in Mongolia and Samarkand.

"Would anyone like more lamb?" Anaïs asked, opening the second bottle of wine.

I went pale, already preparing the excuse I would give, since, with Whitney present, we'd run through all the lamb I'd prepared.

"No, thank you!" Father Hans said. "In fact Whitney had already invited us to a cake before dinner."

I sighed with relief, wondering whether Whitney had tried to talk them into visiting us in the first place.

That night, after the clergy had left and Anaïs had fallen asleep, I stayed alone in the kitchen, going back over the past few days: the white van that had tried to run me down, Whitney's call at two in the morning, being excluded from the lunch with Arthur Holmes, Zernebog's letter exposing a network of favoritism, Whitney's smile at dinner as she set her trap about our rent. All the attacks, I thought, as the tap water ran over my hands, came from the same source: our marked-out weakness. Arkadina had succeeded in demonizing me, and any action of mine, however kind or well-meaning, was read, under the prevailing narrative, as some perverse or ill-intentioned act on my part.

I did not know, in those dangerous days, why I

responded with a serenity that strikes me today as superhuman. It was not defiant courage; nor stubborn pride, much less ignorance of the danger. I knew I was being surrounded, that any conversation could be an ambush and any smile a mask concealing the ending. And yet, within me lived a calm that came not from reason, but from the soul.

Years later, in Chennai, God would manifest himself to me with a majesty I have described in my poems: in that epiphany, Jesus anointed me Judge of the Living and the Dead, which I then understood as a spiritual investiture that also extended to my craft as a writer, granting me authority to judge those I had known in my life, just as Dante had judged his own.

That explained why I could defy men, institutions, and even nations, without their veiled threats truly doing me any harm. Those attacking me in Bishkek believed they were fighting over a teaching post, a lecture, or a miserable scrap of university power, but they did not know they were taking part in their own trial, as were their nations and families, in which each person would appear before a judge far vaster than our limited reason can grasp.

I did not fully understand the magnitude of it myself, and it was the Holy Spirit acting through me, granting, in every conversation, the exact answer, the sharpest rebuttal, the most uncomfortable truth. And it was God who, in his providence, altered the forces of the world so that I might emerge unharmed from every attempt on my life, just as I had emerged unharmed since my childhood, and just as I would continue to, throughout my life, facing down schemers, communities, and creeds.

20. The Bribe

*Ego creavi interfectorem ad disperdendum. Omne
vas quod fictum est contra te non dirigitur et omnem
linguam resistentem tibi in iudicio indicabis.*

Isaiah 54:16–17

Bishkek, November 7, 2002

Annula, who had extended one of her trips to Mongolia, sent no answer to the many emails I sent her over the weekend. Instead, I received two messages: one from Zernebog, who, in an apologetic tone, was trying to bribe me for a second time, and another from Arkadina, who defiantly summoned me and Zernebog to a meeting in her office the following morning.

I reread Zernebog's message several times. Then I remembered the first time he'd walked into my office.

It was after class, once the room had already emptied out. The sun came in slanting through the tall windows, and dust motes floated in the beams of light like small drifting continents. I was straightening my papers. He walked in without knocking, and he hadn't come for the pleasure of a visit. He introduced himself the way any celebrity grants a favor: assuming that his sudden presence was itself a gift to me.

He gave off a pleasant cologne—the kind advertised at airports, in posters of square-jawed men gazing at the horizon—though his short stature and thinning hair contrasted sharply with those images.

He combined an elegance that tried to be discreet but came off as ostentatious; his suit was navy blue, Italian-cut, and his shoes gleamed under the fluorescent light as though freshly polished. He didn't take the seat I offered him, but rested one hand on my desk, right beside my

notes, showing off a watch far too large for his wrist, aligning himself with wealthy men who buy such things to remind others who they are.

"Professor," he said, and his smile wasn't a question, but the confirmation of an axiom. "Could we talk for a moment?"

"You've missed several weeks of class," I answered. "You should be the one seeking the moment, not me."

He nodded, as though my reproach were an irrelevant fact he had already considered and dismissed.

"Work matters. The program I host requires me to travel often. I already spoke with the dean. She assured me we could reach an agreement."

"The only possible agreement is that you attend the classes you've missed and turn in the overdue work."

Zernebog smiled broadly, showing off his white teeth, so often broadcast across the nation; his look was that of someone accustomed to getting his way.

"Let's be practical, professor. You have something I need; I have something you need. It's that simple."

"What do you need?" I asked, though I already knew.

"To pass your course. And I need you not to ask me why, because I admit I haven't attended; the reasons are personal, professional. You know how this works in our country; commitments are sometimes unavoidable."

He paused. He leaned in slightly, as though about to confide a secret.

"I can pay you," he said, his tone now even flatter, as natural as though discussing the price of an appliance, "double your monthly salary. Let's say, around four hundred dollars. You give me whatever private lessons I need to catch up, and I hand you that money. Nothing illegal about it; it's a private service, something like hiring a tutor."

"No," I answered. There was no indignation in my

voice, only nausea, the revulsion of someone who has criticized, one too many times, in one too many countries, people who believe the world runs on a single currency.

Zernebog looked at me as though I'd just failed a basic arithmetic problem; he blinked twice.

"Are you sure?" he asked, and this time his smile tightened just slightly. "Because I assure you this is what everyone does. It's nothing personal; it's just how things work here. I take private lessons with other professors. The dean herself knows it; so does the rector."

"Then talk to the others."

He straightened up. He adjusted the strap of his watch. The metal made a dry sound, like a warning click.

"I'll speak with the University president," he said, and his voice was no longer friendly. "And with the student senate."

"Speak with whomever you like," I answered. "With me you're wasting your time."

He stayed a second longer, as though expecting me to retract. I didn't.

"We'll see," he said, finally.

He left without saying goodbye. The door shut with a dry thud, and the sound echoed through the empty classroom like an omen. On my desk he had left an envelope, which I opened after class.

That afternoon I sent him an email explaining my position in detail.

It was that very email they were now using to accuse me.

The next day, Irina stood up in the middle of class; I was explaining the difference between a fact and an interpretation when she spoke, without even asking permission.

"Professor," she said, arms crossed, her voice loud enough that no one could pretend not to hear, "we want to talk about Zernebog."

"Let's talk after class," I answered.

"No," she said. "Now."

The room fell silent. Twenty-three students stopped taking notes.

"Zernebog told us what happened," she went on. "He says you refused to give him private lessons. That you humiliated him. That you treated him like a criminal."

My indignation grew, and I saw that, given that attitude, I had no choice but to teach them my own stance on lying and corruption.

"That's not true," I answered. "Zernebog offered me four hundred dollars to pass him without attending class. That is a bribe; I refused."

"He says it was a misunderstanding," another student cut in, a young man with a faint beard. "That he only wanted to catch up."

"To catch up, you don't need to offer money. All you need to do is attend class."

Irina looked at me with a hatred she made no effort to hide.

"If you don't take Zernebog back, we'll make sure your contract isn't renewed next year. That's not a threat; it's a fact."

No one contradicted her, twenty-three students in silence, all cohesive as though they were the old proletariat before the Tsar.

"And what makes you think I want my contract renewed?" I answered, before their stunned expressions. "Now, if we're done, let's return to the lesson."

Zernebog's second message, the one I was now rereading, was more skillful than the first. It made no mention of money. It spoke of "a misunderstanding" and his wish to "resolve things amicably." It was the language of someone who had consulted professors like Arkadina.

I remembered then the first time I saw hatred in his eyes; it was when he saw my face, too similar to a Turk's. Turkey competed with Russia not only

academically—with more modern, better-funded universities than many Russian and American institutions in the region—but also for influence over the former republics of the Caucasus and Central Asia, territories Moscow had considered a natural part of its sphere since the days of the Russian Empire and Peter the Great.

It was afterward that a student confided in me, privately, that Arkadina had suggested he write down everything I said in class.

“To have proof,” the student said.

I asked no further questions.

Though I refrained from answering Zernebog’s email, Arkadina approached me the next day in the cafeteria. I immediately spotted Oleg’s pale face at a nearby table; he didn’t seem surprised to see me there.

“There have already been two similar complaints,” she warned me, “in both of which the students’ innocence was established behind closed doors. It’s a cultural misunderstanding: English, after all, is neither your mother tongue nor Zernebog’s.”

“And yet English is the very language in which we’re communicating right now,” I clarified. “Zernebog, like you, like me, commands it perfectly well.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” Arkadina grumbled. “In any case, no one at this University will give any credence to your accusations.”

“Are you implying I’ve lied?”

Arkadina nodded, discreetly.

“In that case, one of us will have to leave,” I declared. “Him, or me.”

Zernebog walked into the cafeteria at that very moment, but the second he noticed me, he vanished into the crowd of the hallways.

“Did you see that?” I exclaimed. “That’s how guilty he is—he doesn’t even dare show his face.”

That afternoon I burst into Annula’s office; she

received me quite kindly, apologizing for her extended trip.

“Haven’t you received my emails?”

“No,” Annula lied. “I’ve been too busy. What is it about?”

I told her what had happened.

“I understand perfectly,” she said, with a doctrinaire air. “You feared the bribe was a trap set by Arkadina; you accept it, your dean reports you for enriching yourself off a student, and then they fire you from the Faculty for demanding bribes.”

My expression tightened in surprise; from the very start I’d been sailing between Scylla and Charybdis.

“I know she behaved badly toward you when you arrived,” Annula said, clearing her throat, “which explains your caution. You could, in fact, easily have accepted that student’s money; your contract with SEP, after all, allows you to work up to twelve additional hours a week.”

“I don’t approve of bribery,” I said, wondering whether she was suggesting I accept the four hundred dollars this time, free of future accusations.

“After all,” Annula smiled, mockingly, “how could you prove your student’s offer was an act of corruption?”

“I have an email he wrote me.”

“In what language?”

“English, of course.”

“No court in this country will accept that,” Annula declared, with the same indifference Pontius Pilate must have shown while condemning Jesus. “Corruption is an almost uncontrollable phenomenon in Kyrgyzstan, Marco. In a few months we’ll have democratic elections. Do you know who’s going to win? The President.”

“And he’ll stay in power until someone proves, in this country, that one can live well without accepting bribes.”

Annula looked at me as though I carried some incurable virus.

“Don’t take offense, I insist, if a student offers you

money for a private course. SEP's policy is clear on this: we try, as much as possible, not to interfere with each institution's laws and processes. Above all, we're not interested in stirring up a scandal with this country's American University; you should know its budget is almost entirely funded by the U.S. State Department."

"SEP depends on the Soros Foundation," I replied, "and the Soros Foundation depends on donations from the State Department."

"Of course," Annula's gaze turned glacial. "But I don't think you understand the channels involved. There's a special agreement between the American University and SEP: we, for instance, don't pay a single cent for your apartment's rent."

"But you do pay the rent for professors working in Ulaanbaatar and Samarkand."

"Those are exceptions to the rule!" Annula replied, irritated that I had so quickly objected to her lesson in domestic economics.

"I understand our own case," I nodded, conciliatory. "Now that you mention it: two days ago, someone entered our building and cut our electricity overnight."

"Mirbek already told me about that," Annula smiled. "Probably a beggar."

"Or someone from the University who wants us gone. This morning someone called my wife; she answered, but only heard a chorus of young people laughing."

"People here resent foreigners," Annula declared, in an indolent tone. "Or are you implying your students are criminals?"

It was clear Annula had already spoken with Arkadina and Zernebog behind my back.

"How would you advise I proceed?" I asked, cautiously.

"You should settle this conflict behind closed

doors."

"Agreed," I nodded. "But in your presence."

Annula sighed, impatiently. Her trembling hands searched her desk drawers for her planner.

"Tomorrow," she said. "Ten in the morning, in my office. I'll summon you and Arkadina."

Back home, Anaïs told me she wanted to come with me.

"I appreciate it," I said, stroking her lips. "But this battle is behind closed doors."

"I'll wait outside your office," she said, conciliatory.

Then the phone rang: the meeting with Arkadina and Annula had suffered a last-minute change. Zernebog would attend. It would be a farce meant to force me into admitting that Zernebog had, in fact, never tried to bribe me, and that the whole affair was nothing but a counterproductive flight of my own imagination.

I received little concentration during my private German lesson. Olga noticed my distant gaze, my mechanical answers: she surely knew what was going on, but didn't ask; in Bishkek, friends and relatives had learned that asking was the first step toward becoming an accomplice. While she explained the difference between *erhalten* and *annehmen*, my mind kept circling back to the letter I'd printed that morning.

"*Erhalten* is 'to receive,'" Olga said, tapping the blackboard with chalk. "*Annehmen* is 'to accept,' to take something willingly. One can *erhalten* a letter without having asked for it; but to *annehmen* a gift, an offer, or a blame, requires consent."

I smiled to myself. At that university, many wanted me to *erhalten* bribes, when all I wished to do was *annehmen* worthy essays.

Bishkek, November 8, 2002

Arriving at SEP's offices, we were met by Darixa's

stern face.

"You could have simply forgotten about this matter," she said, walking off, allowing no comment.

I walked into a windowless room and sat down at an oval table. Annula took a seat to my left, and Arkadina and Zernebog to my right. The arrangement was not accidental: I was the only one without an ally in that geometry.

"We are gathered to reconcile our differences," Annula announced.

Zernebog told his side of the story in line with his letter, omitting the episode with the envelope and adding that my behavior had been excessive, since all he had done was write to me in a friendly tone. His voice was a television voice: modulated, confident, used to never being interrupted.

"Would you like to correct his version?" Annula asked me.

I recounted precisely what had happened, adding:

"The following day, the students defended him, which offended me even more. One of them even threatened me, saying that if I didn't take him back into the course, they would see to it that my work contract was cancelled."

"What a melodramatic account!" Arkadina remarked, venomously.

"Do you admit, then, that you offered me extra money?" I asked Zernebog.

The national television celebrity stammered and looked to Arkadina, who hurriedly cut in to say my attitude wasn't appropriate toward a colleague who considered this case a mere misunderstanding.

"Why don't you let him answer my question?" I snapped at her.

Arkadina's jaw trembled uncontrollably. I realized this was a dilemma my interlocutors had, quite naïvely,

walked straight into. If Zernebog answered no, it would contradict his own written message. If he answered yes, Arkadina would have to retract her earlier claim.

"The fact is, you're protecting him!" I exclaimed. "Unworthy conduct for a professor who claims to respect the educational process!"

Zernebog and Arkadina's faces were frozen. I had exposed their lies, and I couldn't help but enjoy, for a few moments, my victory over their scheme.

"I don't want Zernebog expelled from the University," I admitted, conciliatory. "But it's essential that he acknowledge his mistake and commit to not repeating it."

"Are you calling me a liar?" Arkadina shouted.

"Yes, both you and him!" Annula suddenly cut in, silencing the room. "So yes, there was a bribe, and it's only logical that Marco would defend himself by exposing it."

"What a splendid display of emotion and drama!" Arkadina exclaimed, an offended look on her face. "What's the process now?"

"Nothing we discuss here will leave this room," Annula said.

"Unless necessary!" I interrupted her. "And if the academic committee requires it, you, Annula, will have to testify."

I left that office convinced my reputation had been vindicated. That impression fell apart hours later, when, after a glacial reception, Annula informed me that my contract with SEP would not be renewed the following year, since the journalism program's director had not requested it.

"To be expected, from Arkadina," I replied, thoughtfully. "But couldn't I secure a position at another university?"

Annula shook her head, decisively. Far from feeling shaken, I nodded, certain we would rebuild our life in England. Darixa must have noticed, since, as I was

leaving, she asked whether we already had tickets back to France for the winter break.

"No," I answered. "And honestly, I don't think we'll be buying any."

"May I ask why?"

"First, we don't have the money, and, second, if our departure is already a settled matter, wouldn't it be better to immerse ourselves in Bishkek's everyday life for two more months?"

Darixa got up from her desk and began organizing the objects on it with an urgent frenzy.

"We can pay for two round-trip Lufthansa tickets to Europe for you," she smiled. "It's a gift we occasionally give to certain faculty members."

My eyes widened, surprised. In exchange for what? Was I simply supposed to forget the incident with Zernebog, and receive in return not only a renewed contract, but also plane tickets worth four thousand dollars? Darixa disappeared into Annula's office for several minutes.

Anaïs would have been thrilled if we traveled to see her parents for Christmas. I, on the other hand, would have received Groumont's usual recriminations and anathemas against South Americans.

Ce que je veux savoir, c'est quand vont-ils déposer les bagages?

I got up, unwilling to sacrifice my integrity for a three-thousand-euro bribe, and left SEP's offices without saying goodbye.

Back home I ate some of the high-quality dried fruit we'd bought at the market, and returned to my reading of Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Just as Anaïs was walking into the apartment, back from the university, one of the thick peach pits got stuck in my throat. I struggled to breathe and jumped up, trying to dislodge it. Anaïs screamed, asking how she could help, and I, more worried

about her panic than my growing asphyxiation, smiled in an effort to calm her down. The harder I tried to spit out the pit, the deeper it lodged in my windpipe. Finally I gestured for Anaïs to strike my back. I bent over, and she hit me timidly. I tried to tell her harder, but I could only manage a few pained groans.

"You're choking!" she screamed. "You're turning purple!"

I calmed myself, remembering I could hold my breath up to two minutes underwater, and realized it was the last day of my thirty-third year of life.

Would I die at the same age as Jesus Christ? a voice whispered inside me, an absurd temptation I later attributed to the devil.

I saw no heroism in dying choked by a peach pit, and, somersaulting against the wall, I flipped myself upside down until, with gravity's help, I spat it out.

As I recovered my strength on the floor, flat on my back, Anaïs held me.

"I thought you were going to leave me alone!" she sobbed.

"I think it's witchcraft from all the citizens of Bishkek offended by my integrity," I said, picturing the curses they must have been casting my way from their homes.

Bishkek, November 9, 2002

The film we screened last night at the Film Club couldn't have better reflected the reality I was living. Petra, however, merely sighed impatiently when I told her I felt just like the film's protagonist, unjustly accused by a court of witch-hunters.

"I'll believe it the day I see you in the hospital, or the cemetery, because of your heroics," she grumbled, with that lack of tact so typical of the Swiss. "For now, I'd recommend you see a psychiatrist."

I understood then that Petra, like everyone else,

had already chosen her side, no doubt a victim of that institutional cowardice that rewards loyalty to the system over friendship.

The theater was full, as had become usual. The crowd applauded as I climbed onto the podium, from which I made out, in the front row, the faces of Arkadina, Zernebog, Magda, Dr. Utkin, Annula, Darixa, Rector Gulmat, and Jeff.

"Is it fair to seek revenge on a man simply because he refuses to take part in a dishonest practice that nearly everyone in a given society engages in? That is the question Arthur Miller raises in his play *The Crucible*, based on the trials that took place in seventeenth-century Massachusetts, in which Salem's Puritan patriarchs sent dozens of innocent maidens and farmers to the stake, out of a desire for revenge. The questions Miller raised during the McCarthy era have lost none of their relevance, and we might well ask whether we, the inhabitants of Kyrgyzstan, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, are not sacrificing reason and virtue to traditions deeply rooted in daily life since the Stalinist era. I mean, of course, corruption in politics and in everyday life."

A murmur spread through the crowd, and I could see the shaken, indignant faces of Darixa and Arkadina.

"Is it fair for us to accept a bribe simply because hundreds of people do the same?" I went on, raising my voice. "And whoever chooses to expose a bribe, would they not become the victim of those very hysterical dames and inquisitorial judges who assume bribery is simply one of the ways of life this society offers? The taste this film leaves behind is that of injustice triumphing over honesty and truth. But if Miller wants us to feel the powerlessness those characters lived through, it's because he wants every society to correct such injustices. What we're about to watch is a mirror of our own reality, in this year, 2002, in Bishkek."

By the end of the film, Petra's face was drenched in tears. When she came up to the podium, she refrained from adding any further comments, and I alone had to field the audience's questions.

It was then that I noticed the front row had already emptied out.

Bishkek, November 10, 2002

Anaïs urged me to throw a party on the eve of my thirty-fourth birthday. We bought cold cuts, cakes, vodka, and Coca-Cola. Except for Annula and Darixa, every colleague and SEP staff member attended, along with Gulmira, Nazgul and Sultan, Marcello, José, Tatiana, Uriel, Heidi, and our teachers Olga, Jamilya, Filipa, and Damira. Anaïs came back from the market that afternoon with Hun-Sue, with whom she had by then formed a close friendship.

"How's the university going?" Edward asked me on his arrival, handing me a bottle of Bordeaux.

I made no fuss about telling him about a certain student's attempted bribe.

"Hard to believe," Izatbek remarked, his expression grave. "Do you have proof?"

"An email."

"The State Department won't like this," Edward said, scratching his ear with a worried look.

For a moment I caught Mirbek's nervous expression, as he strained to listen beside me. He grabbed a pastry and told Anaïs he was going out for a smoke.

"He doesn't smoke," I said, once Mirbek had left.

"What?" Edward asked.

"He doesn't smoke; I've never once seen him smoke. And yet, every time someone brings up something that might upset Arkadina, Mirbek goes out for a smoke."

Edward looked at me for a moment.

"You have a good memory," he said.

"It's my job," I answered. "In journalism, memory

is the only proof that can't be forged."

Edward said nothing more, but for the rest of the night I noticed he avoided looking toward the door Mirbek had gone through.

"It's a bottle of hangover-free vodka!" Venkatesh exclaimed, arriving with a wide grin. "Guaranteed!"

"And I brought another!" Marcello said, showing off a liter bottle.

"Of course, Marco never gets drunk," Anaïs cut in.

"How's that possible?" Parvaneh asked me. "I have a Peruvian friend who only ever thinks about drinking."

"Maybe he doesn't like reading as much as Marco does," Gretchen replied, examining my German books behind me.

"But don't think I'm averse to drinking," I answered. "My French relatives have taught me to savor up to a quarter bottle of wine, just enough to feel the first hint of tipsiness."

"Did you forget Marco is French?" Venkatesh asked Parvaneh.

"How embarrassing!" Parvaneh excused herself, with her usual irony. "Sometimes I forget I'm English myself."

I laughed, pleased by her boldness.

"And where's Derogan?" Whitney asked Petra.

"He went back to Boston," Venkatesh said, disappointed.

"He canceled," Petra answered. "He had to go to a job interview. Either way, SEP promised to pay for new tickets, if he doesn't get hired."

"What a spoiled child," Gretchen remarked.

"Every child who never causes trouble is one," Petra snapped back.

"Do you think I cause trouble?" I cut in.

"What they offered you isn't a bribe," Petra said.

"It's normal for someone to want to hire a professor for private lessons. If it happens in Switzerland and France, why not here?"

"Who would have imagined that Swiss and French professors are just like the ones here?" I nodded, ironically.

"Personally I have no complaints at all," Petra snapped. "SEP has taken me to conferences in Samarkand, with Derogan, and they've already invited me to another one, which I'll be traveling to with my brother, who's visiting me next week. We're going to live it up at the Chinggis Khaan, the best hotel in Ulaanbaatar!"

I remembered Darixa's ticket offer; for a moment I considered proposing to Anaïs that we travel to see Austria or Denmark, but I anticipated she would insist on dragging me into the lion's den, back to her homeland, and, spurred on by my own ethical compass, I refrained from sharing Darixa's temptation with her.

Hun-Sue came over with Svetlana, her apartment-mate: a blue-eyed girl with long blonde hair, dressed in a pink silk gown.

"Delighted," she told me. "I know from Hun-Sue that you're one of the most brilliant minds visiting us this year."

Anaïs greeted us and led Hun-Sue off to the kitchen.

"Hun-Sue told me about the attempted bribe the TV host offered you," Svetlana told me.

"That's supposed to be a secret," I replied.

"News travels fast in this city. You should know Zernebog is a rather influential figure in this society."

Translation: Zernebog was also dangerous. Without apologizing, I moved off to welcome new guests.

The beautiful, willowy Nazgul walked in, accompanied by Sultan; she wore a fitted yellow dress, like the heroine of some Japanese manga. I led them over to Anaïs, who at once struck up a conversation with Nazgul, in French, about the city's lack of heating.

Olga urged me to play a tune on the piano. Under Damira's insistence, I led them into the study and sat down at the instrument. I played *Moonlight*, complete this time. The notes intoxicated us, and, somehow, we all sensed that this evening, November 10, 2002, would stay lodged in every one of our memories. We had reached Bishkek after sailing through stormy seas, and, in the eye of the hurricane, we dared to show our happiness and calm, that is, our dignity, heedless of conspiracies, tides, and utopias. I felt, pressing the keys of that piano, that we were all walking along mountain ridges, at the edge of precipices sweetened by the siren songs the Soviet Union had never managed to destroy.

When I finished, there was an overwhelming silence. Marcello applauded first, then Heidi.

"I congratulate you on how quickly you've learned," Marcello said.

"I know for a fact that less than three months ago you couldn't play three chords," Gretchen nodded.

"I have no doubt Gretchen's company has been an inspiration," Whitney said, smiling at Anaïs, venomously.

"God forbid I be anyone's muse," Gretchen snapped, blushing.

"Unfortunately, he hasn't gotten used to playing by sight-reading yet," Damira cut in, with a hint of reproach.

"That's true," I nodded. "I'll get there."

The evening was interrupted by an unexpected visit from Rector Gulmat. Someone turned off the CD player, and the crowd fell momentarily silent, dazed.

"What a pleasure to see you!" I said. "I'm so glad you accepted our invitation!"

I turned the CD player back on and hugged Gulmat warmly, which prompted everyone to resume their conversations.

I settled her on the back terrace, next to Edward and Izatbek.

"What's the occasion for this gathering?" she asked me, as Anaïs served her a Bloody Mary.

"Tomorrow is Marco's birthday," Izatbek answered.

"What a relief to hear that," Gulmat sighed. "These parties raise too many questions at the university. You two are foreigners, and people wonder whether you're here on behalf of the USA or France, to colonize us."

We laughed together.

"How's enrollment going for next semester's courses?" Anaïs asked.

"Some professors have as many as fifty students enrolled, but others have courses that barely reach four or five."

"Lucky them," I remarked.

"Why?" Gulmat asked, biting into a dried peach.

"They'll get a personalized education. Umberto Eco, in fact, complains about courses with more than twenty students at modern universities."

"And isn't quantity better than quality?" Gulmat asked, with a confidence that made me smile.

"I don't think that Soviet precept is very effective among these academics," Nazgul cut in.

"In capitalism, quality is superior to quantity," Edward nodded.

"I'm open to a debate before the whole university," Gulmat sighed. "I believe we should reward professors who draw large crowds, not those who become a financial burden on the university."

"How curious that you'd say that," I remarked, remembering that Marcello had told us Gulmat had once organized a course with him as the sole student. "In fact, I happen to know of a professor at this university who teaches a course for a single student."

"Really?" Gulmat asked, turning pale. "This Bloody Mary is very well made, dear. Could you bring me another?"

Anaïs went to the kitchen, and Gulmat never spoke to me again. Since the professor in question was herself, I could be certain that meeting, meant to debate the primacy of quantity over quality, would never actually take place.

Her unease stirred in me the suspicion that Marcello had been seduced by her: a class held alone, wine poured into two glasses, a secret standing between them.

Only after we left would I later establish that Marcello's sudden change in attitude toward us—he grew cold and distant when I wrote to him from London—had been the consequence of a fierce reproach his secret fiftysomething lover must have delivered to him, during the months she had to answer to the press over the very accusations of university corruption I myself had raised, and which she had decided to turn against me.

I excused myself and went to the kitchen. As I blended the tomatoes, Parvaneh found herself alone with me.

"You should be more careful," she remarked.

"I suspect they might be putting a curse on me," I said.

Parvaneh laughed, delighted.

"Do you think they're doing voodoo on you with a doll? You've definitely read too many books..."

"I don't rule out that possibility," I remarked. "Still, I'm a man who believes in Jesus. Whatever they do, they won't manage to touch so much as my shadow."

I brought the Bloody Mary to Gulmat, who this time turned out to be extremely kind.

"Is there anything else you need to tell me?" she asked me.

"Actually," I nodded, "I wanted to mention that a student offered me a bribe to pass a course. His name is Zernebog."

"Ah!" Gulmat looked at me, wounded, as though I had offended her at the deepest level.

"We can talk about it another day," I replied. "I just wanted you to be aware, for now."

"You'll excuse me," she said, standing up. "But I should go check on my husband."

That night, once everyone had left and Anaïs was silently gathering up the glasses, I stood at the window. The city was dark, save for a few streetlamps. Everyone in that place carried their own anxieties, but only Anaïs and I, in our unshakable faith, always had an answer, a way out, for every danger.

21. An Idealist Accused of Accusing

Solitude is God's courtroom
Germán Espinosa

Bishkek, November 12, 2002

Yesterday, Monday, Zernebog burst into my Media in Conflict class.

"I've come to face you!" he exclaimed, voice trembling. "So you can't say I feel guilty and I'm afraid of you!"

"Who told you that?" I asked, calmly. "Arkadina?"

"You've been going around telling everyone at this university!"

"That's not true," I answered. "If I'm asking whether it was Arkadina, it's because she's the only one I've ever shared that phrase with, the very one you're now repeating with such indignation."

"Well, I'm not afraid to face you!"

"It took you several days."

"What?" he exclaimed, taking two steps forward.

"I hope you won't prolong this unfortunate scene," I answered. "We're in class. Now, if you'd like to attend my lecture, you're more than welcome to take your seat."

Zernebog sat down without another word and attended the class with a docility that moved me.

He had also already failed that course, but, since it was elective, and graded on essays Zernebog had punctually sent me through his classmates, I decided to reinstate him without objection, right before the final exam.

At the end of class, Zernebog said goodbye with watery eyes, not daring to confess that our conflict no

longer depended on him, but on higher forces he could no longer contain.

Walking through the university's hallways, I noticed students, professors, and staff alike avoiding me. I confronted several of my students, who hardened their expressions and looked away toward other passersby. Those crowded corridors turned, before my eyes, into passages from Dante's circle of the avaricious.

Everyone longed for the perks the university and society offered. A greedy dance, inherited from their parents, that admitted no correction, no reform. Bribery was one of the greatest sources of income their generation had been handed.

Who was this foreigner, come to question them?

With heavy heart I realized their independent studies masked a machinery that was merely the beginning of a growing greed.

My destruction was demanded by their inherited belief that a bribe was simply another form of income, that greed was all too human, that the university survived as just another fiefdom. Oh, that vision of the world, already condemned by Dante's verses to its own terrible, self-inflicted sentence: that ill-giving and ill-keeping have stripped them of the beautiful world, and set them at this brawl — whatever it is, no words shall gild it; now you may see, my son, the brief mockery of the goods entrusted to fortune, over which mankind tears itself apart; for all the gold that lies beneath the moon, and all that ever was, could not bring rest to a single one of these weary souls.

Back home, the phone rang insistently.

"Hello?"

I heard a chorus of laughter, among which I recognized Irina's unmistakable giggle.

"Have you taken Gretchen to the motel yet?"

"Adulterer!"

Before I could answer, they'd already hung up. They knew that if I reported them to Arkadina, all I'd get

were denials, and I'd be branded a slanderer myself.

"Are you having an affair with Gretchen?" would be their counterattack. "There are certainly several students who've seen the two of you flirting in the university hallways, with no regard whatsoever for our morals."

It would also be counterproductive to mention it to Anaïs, so I decided to ignore it. Going to bed, I wondered whether Anaïs had received a similar call in my absence; surely she had, but she, in her French delicacy, would also have chosen to ignore it.

Bishkek, November 13, 2002

Last night we very nearly burned to death.

Around two in the morning I got up for water and caught a faint glow out of the corner of my right eye as I crossed the hallway dividing our bedroom from the main bathroom. I turned my half-asleep face and, to my alarm, discovered a blaze devouring the entryway wall in front of the main door.

I shouted to Anaïs in several languages while jumping into the kitchen to fill the cleaning bucket with water.

"Fire! Fire! Sauve qui peut! Alles brennt! We are on fire! Здание горит!"

Coming back with the bucket, I faced a blaze already licking the apartment ceiling. Anaïs was screaming that we couldn't leave, that we were trapped. I spotted the brightest glow around the electrical box and, ignoring the bold flames pinching my skin like the tentacles of an invisible octopus, I threw the bucket's contents onto the wires. The larger flames died out with a pained hiss. Some small flames still danced beneath the ceiling, so I grabbed the sheet from our bed and, wrapping it around my right arm, threw it onto the water pooled on the tile and, from there, onto those living sparks, until I'd smothered them entirely.

I opened the door immediately and saw a shadow slipping down the stairs.

I held Anaïs, who was sobbing inconsolably.

"It's over now!" I comforted her.

I took her back to bed and reassured her, reminding her how God had also woken me in time, once, to keep our apartment in Portugal from catching fire because of a candle I'd left burning on top of Cioran's *Œuvres Complètes*.

Then I got a flashlight and inspected the entryway: our electrical box had been tampered with, and the wires crossed, causing a deliberate short circuit. I stood motionless before the burned wires for a long moment.

Evils must be uprooted entirely, I remembered my uncle Héctor's imperious voice saying, standing before an edition of Dante's *Commedia* illustrated by Doré, a quote I never once managed to find in all my exhausting reading.

The air smelled of melted plastic. I looked at my hands: pink marks ran across my knuckles, where the flames had grazed me.

There was a progression to all of it: the veiled threats, then the systematic discrediting, then the formal trial, then the fire.

Had they only meant to cut our electricity again with a short circuit, as before, or were they hoping to find our incinerated bodies the next day? Were they willing to kill the children of the families in the neighboring apartments too, even those in adjoining buildings?

As though someone were turning up the volume on a warning I stubbornly refused to hear, I sensed no one would believe my account of what had happened, arguing that the fire hadn't even consumed the front door.

I called Annula.

"Hello?" she asked. "Do you know what time it is?"

"They tried to burn us alive," I told her. "An entire wall of our apartment went up in flames from a deliberate

short circuit. If I hadn't gone to the bathroom, I wouldn't have been able to contain the blaze."

"My God!" she exclaimed. "I'm putting you and your wife up at the Hyatt Hotel right now!"

"It's not that serious!" I replied. "The fire's under control. I just need you to send an electrician first thing to fix the wiring. And, please, write to my dean, Arkadina, to excuse my absence from class this morning."

Annula agreed, her voice contrite. I felt she was finally acknowledging I'd been right. I said goodbye and went back to bed, unable to sleep.

Esprit de l'escalier!, I thought, realizing I should have accepted Annula's offer to move us to the Hyatt until they repaired our apartment, or moved us to a more suitable one.

Wasn't it only logical that, given my refusal, she would now regard my complaint as exaggerated? How many people in the world would turn down the offer of a few days at a five-star hotel?

I considered that, like Dante, I found myself in the middle of my life's journey, facing beasts wanting to destroy me for following the most honest path.

Literature describes what we live, I thought. I took up my heavily annotated volume of the *Inferno*, translated into verse by Ángel Crespo, with the original text on the facing page, and reread it until the first rays of dawn.

Bishkek, November 14, 2002

The electrician knocked on the door at nine-thirty in the morning.

"My name is Igor," he said, shyly.

I showed him the damage and woke Anaïs to keep an eye on him while I bathed and dressed. Coming back from buying naan and milk, I found him whitewashing the burned wall with lime.

"Are you also a painter?" I asked him.

"Around here we all know how to do a bit of everything," he nodded, with a hint of pride.

Anaïs shrugged beside me. While I made breakfast, I got a call from Annula, who, after asking if we were okay, reminded me of the meeting we had at noon, at a hotel on the outskirts of the city. Anaïs got dressed up, and we had to wait for Igor to finish his work, which delayed us nearly half an hour. Walking up to the round table SEP had arranged, all our local and international colleagues, especially Arkadina, stared at us in astonishment.

"So sorry we're late!" Anaïs said, with a sibylline authority. "But the people in this country are so unpredictable. You trust them to do their job well, but they end up wasting time on tasks they don't even know how to do."

I watched Arkadina's pale face, as she and Annula strained to appear friendly; she looked at us as though we were two corpses returned from the flames. I gathered she had already tried to persuade Annula that I was delusional, or exaggerating a simple domestic accident.

"They were supposed to come to the house to fix the electrical system," Anaïs went on, with the candor and frankness so characteristic of her, "and instead all they do is paint over every trace of their criminal attack with lime."

A rising moan filled the room: Arkadina had fainted and lay at Annula's feet, who screamed for someone to call an ambulance. Arkadina suddenly opened her eyes and said she just hadn't had breakfast, but that she was fine now.

Only I understood that Anaïs's composed complaints weren't aimed at Arkadina and her cronies of corrupt professors and students, but at Igor, who hadn't managed to repaint the wall in under half an hour.

At the end of the lunch, Annula came over to tell me I'd need to give a lecture in Osh in fifteen days.

My face lit up for a moment; I gathered that expense was meant to make up for my refusal to stay at the

Hyatt Hotel.

“And Anaïs?” I asked, my expression darkening.
“Will she come with me?”

“I’m afraid not.”

I nodded, sourly, understanding that, in her eyes, the merit of scorning this world’s luxuries belonged exclusively to me.

I discreetly steered her into a private room.

“This isn’t what I agreed with Rachel when she hired me!” I shouted, letting loose all the tension from my sleepless night. “How is it possible you fund conferences at the best hotels in Central Asia for Derogan, and, I’ve heard, for Petra’s brother too? I also know you’re sending every SEP international professor on vacation to Europe this December, round-trip tickets paid to Europe and the United States, except for us!”

Without waiting for her answer, we left the room and got into Vladimir’s taxi.

“What happened last night?” Parvaneh asked.

I told her what had happened, but Parvaneh only nodded in monosyllables. No doubt the story, spread on Dr. Utkin’s orders, that I suffered from paranoia, was far more reassuring for her own self-interested purposes.

“Last night’s scare left me with a backache,” I remarked.

“It would do you good to stop being overweight,” Parvaneh replied, without looking at me.

Getting home, I weighed myself and found I was back up to a hundred kilos.

“Overweight?” I exclaimed. “Who said I was overweight?”

Parvaneh simply smiled with obvious condescension. I looked at Anaïs, who shrugged; getting home, I weighed myself and found I was back up to a hundred kilos.

“Starting today I’ll do sit-ups every day,” I

announced to Anaïs.

The American University of Kyrgyzstan’s main hall had been arranged for the occasion with a care that betrayed the anxiety of those who fear solemnity alone might not be enough. Long-stemmed flowers in cut-crystal vases, white tablecloths over the mahogany tables, portraits of Kant and Jefferson hung symmetrically on the back wall, vouching for the institution’s intellectual lineage before a visitor who, its organizers preached, could buy the entire philosophical tradition outright if he wished to.

The staff moved about with a fixed, slightly mechanical smile, the smile of people who have practiced deference until it became instinct. It was a Tuesday afternoon in October, and Bishkek’s air smelled of steppe dust and premature heating.

George Soros entered the hall, flanked by his entourage, with the calm unhurriedness of someone who’s spent decades used to having rooms reorganize themselves around him. He was a man of medium height, with a pensive, slightly gloomy expression; the real world always struck him as somehow inferior to his own mental categories. Behind him, in a barely disguised formation, walked Annula, Arkadina, Rachel, Darixa, and Jeff, each wearing that composed expression of the initiated, who know their proximity to the center radiates prestige outward. Annula wore a look of watchful intelligence, simultaneously monitoring several conversations and several dangers; Arkadina, somewhat taller, smiled with a generous, calculated broadness; Rachel scanned the room, cataloguing; Darixa needed only to represent herself; her presence was argument enough. Jeff, finally, seemed the only one genuinely pleased to be there, which, curiously, made him the most suspicious of them all.

I stood by the column at the west end of the room, holding a glass of mineral water, watching the ceremony with a mix of fascination and discomfort that had accompanied me since my very first day in this city. I was

Colombian, Catholic, dressed in a purple wool jacket and a sky-blue silk tie; I'd spent eight months teaching journalism in theory, and ethics in practice, at an institution that proudly proclaimed its mission of planting liberal democracy in the heart of Central Asia. I looked over the excited faces of my Kyrgyz, Kazakh, Uzbek, and some Russian students; several examined me, I sensed, as an ethnographic curiosity: a Latin American in Bishkek, attractive enough to have married a French maiden; the consummate reader who commanded hundreds of books in several languages, moving like a fish through a sea of questions and traps.

Soros spoke with the precise, somewhat monotonous diction of someone who has given the same speech in too many halls around the world, but who still believes, or pretends to believe, in its content. He praised the intellectual wealth of the former Soviet republics. He mentioned dialectical materialism, which now, he said, modulating with an air of pretended subtlety, was being enriched and complicated by Frankfurt School philosophy. There were appreciative murmurs. Rector Gulmat, seated in the front row, hands folded in her lap, nodded with the steady rhythm of a metronome. Then Soros announced, without particular emphasis, dropping it the way one leaves a generous tip after a pleasant lunch, that he would donate one million dollars for the construction of a student dormitory.

The applause was long; it mattered little that, weeks later, it would come out that the money would actually come from the U.S. State Department; the "management" and the "lobbying" of that budget belonged to Soros's staff.

Kyrgyzstan's President, seated to the right of the podium, took advantage of the pause to speak. He was a sturdily built man with a deep voice, carrying a somewhat theatrical authority, the kind belonging to politicians who

have learned conviction can be substituted with volume. He praised the American University's culture of zero tolerance for bribery, and announced his government would reward that virtue with a plot of central Bishkek land, on which to build the promised dormitory.

There was more applause, briefer this time, since the audience had already instinctively calculated that the second announcement was worth proportionally less than the first.

"They don't know what to do with so much vacant land," Venkatesh remarked to me one night at his apartment.

Then Rector Gulmat took the floor; her flushed cheeks gave her fifty years a youthful glow.

I imagined the heat of her Kazakh features in Marcello's arms, who, wearing a brown jacket, smiled at her beside a group of three young women accompanying him. I let my imagination wander over their intimate arrangement: *no one can ever know what happened, and it means nothing between us; you, so young, have your own loves, and I, married, have my family.*

Her gaze alternated between sharpness and an impenetrable reserve; she wore her hair pulled back severely, and had dressed for the reception in an elegant winter suit. She spoke calmly, unhurried, promising to process the necessary paperwork for the American State Department to contribute another million dollars to the project.

Her announcement was met with an already automatic applause, a conditioned reflex.

Three million dollars in fifteen minutes, I thought. Liberal democracy was, among other things, an extraordinarily efficient business.

The ceremony ended, and we were led to the adjoining room, where the tables held bottles of Georgian wine and trays of canapés. We were supposed to exchange a few words with Soros. The billionaire, however, excused

himself with a brief, almost imperceptible bow, and left alongside President Akayev toward some more private, more real space than this decorative hall. His entourage was left scattered, orphaned satellites of the sun they'd been orbiting.

I walked over to the group where Gulmat was discussing the challenge of hiring an architect for the planned building.

I was intercepted by Whitney, who, upon seeing me, dragged me into another central group and asked me, in front of Daler, Saodat, Tom, Edward, Weiler, and Polina, whether I didn't agree that Latin America was, compared to Central Asia, a continent stagnated by endless internal wars, at which Edward and Tom proposed a toast I raised without showing the slightest displeasure.

The wine lacked acidity, which prompted me to speculate on how harmful socialist left-wing ideology had been for Colombia's development. As I anticipated, Weiler and Tom took offense, and drifted off to greet a local bureaucrat.

"I heard them insulting our region," José said, beside me.

I used his arrival as an excuse to slip away, chatting with him in Spanish, explaining that a certain Southerner still hadn't forgiven me for coming between her and Anaïs.

The room held the artificial warmth of institutional celebrations where no one is ever quite fully present.

"The architect issue is complicated," Gulmat was saying. "We need someone who understands both the functional demands of a modern university dormitory and the particular climate of this region. Bishkek's winters don't forgive design mistakes."

Gulmat opened her mouth to answer, but at that moment Tom approached from the other end of the room with the urgency of an administrator for whom every private conversation is a potential institutional crisis, and

asked her to join him for some more pressing discussion.

Years later, I would come to understand that interruption more fully: an email that landed by mistake in my inbox—lost among administrative chains and automated replies—revealed to me, with an almost obscene clarity, the true character of Tom and of many of those expatriate professors who proclaimed themselves Marxists, free thinkers, enemies of all imposition. The message began by describing domestic trivialities in Nigeria: an employee named Usman, an Islamic holiday, the morning heat in Yola; then drifted, with the bureaucratic naturalness of someone commenting on the weather, toward rumors about the imminent dismissal of a professor named Elspeth.

"As far as I know, all of this is still pure rumor," Tom wrote, with studied caution, before closing the email with a quote from Marx on the need to carry out "a ruthless criticism of everything existing."

That juxtaposition struck me more than any explicit confession could have. I understood then that, for men like him, ruthless criticism was an ornamental luxury, a rhetoric reserved for university conferences, opinion columns, and boozy dinners among expatriates. Freedom of thought was celebrated so long as it stayed confined to the safe margins of academic discourse; but whoever threatened the real gears of the machine—the favors, the grants, the clientelist networks, the small neocolonial aristocracies through which they administered Central Asia like an intellectual plantation subsidized by the West—immediately stopped being their dear colleague and became an anomaly.

Elspeth already appeared in that email as condemned, before her dismissal had even become official. And I understood, with a retrospective shudder, that Tom must have written about me to Arkadina and other SEP administrators in exactly the same way, long before my final departure: no longer as rumor, but as a silently agreed-

upon verdict.

My true offense did not consist merely in defying the local corrupt machinery, nor in refusing to take part in the system of bribes that lubricated the university; it also lay in my absurd insistence on holding convictions incompatible with the performative cosmopolitanism of those professors: going to Communion on Sundays, speaking of Dante and of guilt, maintaining that corruption was not a matter of cultural relativity but an objective moral degradation.

Tom and the others could quote Marx against imperialism while fiercely defending their own privileges as members of the Western academic caste; they could denounce structures of domination in articles and seminars while scheming, with meticulous efficiency, against anyone who threatened the stability of their grants, departments, and reputations.

Beneath the surface of intellectual radicalism, the old colonial logic survived intact: tolerate every difference, except the one that questioned the very mechanism by which prestige and power were distributed.

Arkadina's brazen intellectual theft, revealed that night, and the way Tom had whisked Gulmat away before she could answer me, were symptoms of an exclusion that had begun long before I even came to suspect it.

Arkadina fled, relieved, and the others gradually scattered toward other conversations, other glasses of wine, that dance of lateral shifts that makes up the real fabric of official receptions.

I went to the bathroom, where I took in the white tiles, now scrupulously clean, with that antiseptic, neutral smell of spaces scrubbed down for a special occasion. I sat on the toilet lid and pondered Mr. Smith going to Washington, hat in hand, illusions intact.

It was then that I heard the bathroom door open and recognized voices.

Jeff first, in that particular tone of his, someone who has cultivated irony until it became indistinguishable from sincere opinion:

"We hired ourselves a devout little Catholic. I imagine he's tortured over masturbating, demanding his girlfriend arrive at the wedding a virgin."

A short, agreeing laugh. Then Mirbek, whose voice always carried that particular quality of someone who enjoys telling a story as much as the story itself:

"According to Annula, it's precisely because of his home country's bad reputation that Marco behaves like Capra's Mr. Smith."

There was a pause. I pictured Jeff frowning, searching his memory.

"Like who?"

"Haven't you seen *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*?"

"Ah!" A longer laugh this time, one of genuine recognition. "Of course. The Republicans just applied that epithet to Senator McCain."

"I don't know how it happened," Mirbek said, and there was now something closer to pure delight in his voice, stripped of any analytical veneer, "but Annula, with Petra's help, managed to get Marco to include that very film in the Film Club he presents at the Municipal Theater."

The laughter that followed was loud and shared, born from the satisfaction of a well-laid trap.

"What a surprise that idealist's going to get when he sees it!" Mirbek exclaimed.

I stayed frozen on the toilet lid, mineral water glass still in hand, listening to my own name circulate through that white-tiled bathroom with the lightness of an after-dinner joke.

Mr. Smith was, indeed, the prototype of a character who sees corruption everywhere around him.

The question I did not ask myself in that moment—because moments of true illumination rarely

announce themselves as such—was whether seeing corruption everywhere constituted, in fact, a flaw of character, or, rather, the logical consequence of paying sufficient attention.

“Marco could have easily accepted the two hundred dollars his student offered him for a private course,” Jeff remarked, and I heard the sound of the bathroom door opening.

“Annula herself told him so!” Mirbek answered, his voice trailing off down the hallway, the echo of something that had already happened before I could even decide whether it was true.

I pulled out my notebook and wrote a poem:

Marco Smith walks, grave and austere, bearing through hallways his calvary; they call him, with university scorn, “Mr. Smith, the sanctimonious idealist.” Incorruptible, faithful shield-bearer of the good, he refuses bribes and absolves nepotisms; he survives conspiracies and ostracism, humbling the quarrelsome, upright and fierce. For he, in God, knows nothing of the fall, and looks upon the slave of metal with pity; his constancy purifies every life. Like the Constant Prince, he raises the song: to be honest, unafraid of any tribunal, for within him shines the Holy Spirit.

I know it’s not I who write this, I told myself, oh Lord, but your Holy Spirit.

And I felt Jesus return to me, balm for my worries, the very Gospel verse that had first set my destiny in motion:

What does it profit a man to gain the world, if he loses his soul?

For years I had suspected that this kind of poetic outburst did not come entirely from me. It always arose in moments of the deepest humiliation, when reality seemed designed to convince me to give up not only that program, but literature itself. A viscous, persistent voice would then repeat that the world was already saturated with more celebrated, more docile, more decorated writers; men and

women praised by publishers, festivals, and cultural supplements, precisely because they never strayed too far from the accepted ways of narrating the world. But after that murmur came another silence, and in that silence, a certainty far calmer than I ever mistook for my own vanity: *keep going; I am proud of your honesty; carry on; up here, multitudes celebrate that you have not sold your soul.*

I stood up, walked out, and straightened my tie in front of the mirror. In the man staring back at me, I recognized someone proud that he was mocked not for his crimes and sins, but for his unshakable integrity.

I walked out smiling, renewed as I returned: the reception carried on with its uniform murmur of glasses and courtesies, the Georgian wine remained perfectly acceptable, the long-stemmed flowers still stood in their cut-crystal vases.

I went out into the hallway and back into the hall, where the conversations continued along their natural orbit, indifferent to me with a serene detachment.

Bishkek, November 15, 2002

Today, as a German class exercise, I wrote an email to my old friend Walter in New York. Winds of war blow across Central Asia:

“Dear Walter,

Anaïs and I have been learning German these past few months. We’re very happy here, because we get to learn not only new languages, but also how to play musical instruments. I would love to be able to play the piano.

I agree with your thoughts on American politics; unfortunately, this situation persists, since most of the American people support the Bush administration. The whole world, for that matter, seems apathetic. Here, I’m dealing with a bribery case.

A hug,
Marco”

We presented Carl Dreyer's *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc*, with a talk similar to the previous week's, highlighting the parallels between the two playwrights. This time, however, most of the audience found the plot dull and gradually left the theater. On the way out, I stopped several of them, who told me the film reminded them of old Soviet cinema, and of the inflated Western reputation of Eisenstein's monotonous *Ivan the Terrible*.

Bishkek, November 18, 2002

Arkadina, despite my reconciliation with Zernebog, pulled strings to summon me to a trial.

"Dear Mr. Saint-André:

I am Ivan Popov, dean of the Faculty of Architecture. I am chairman of the University's Appeals Committee, and we have received a petition from one of our students.

Zernebog Tripov states that he was accused of bribery by you, and asks that we investigate whether this is true or not.

Our committee has decided to take up this case and initiate official proceedings to resolve this conflict and issue our recommendations. Please find the Committee's description at the end of this message.

It is highly desirable that this meeting take place on Monday, November 25th, at 2 p.m. At the meeting, the committee will allow both parties to present their views on the situation. The committee may also invite individuals who could help clarify the matter (for example, witnesses). We would therefore like to ask you to send us your point of view and your opinion on this matter. Please also let us know whether you would be able to meet with us on Monday (November 25th) for a hearing. If you have any questions, do not hesitate to write to me.

Thank you in advance,
Sincerely,
Ivan Popov
Chairman, Appeals Committee"

I considered giving up and went to Annula's office that afternoon. Arkadina was waiting there, along with Jeff and Rachel.

"You must now prove you haven't come here to slander us," Arkadina said, picking up her purse. "I have no wish to argue with you right now, since we already know how little regard you have for authority."

"When that authority is complicit in corruption," I replied.

"Goodbye!" she exclaimed, leaving the room.

"Can we talk?" I asked Jeff.

"We have an urgent meeting at the rector's office," he excused himself, with a defiant look.

"The proposal Arkadina submitted to the U.S. State Department last month," Rachel cut in, "was approved yesterday. The American University of Kyrgyzstan will receive one million dollars for the development of the Communications Department."

"Finally, some good news," I sighed, genuinely moved.

"Arkadina is a brilliant woman," Rachel went on. "She proposed splitting the department into four specializations starting in the sixth semester. I wish you had contributed your expertise to that project."

"I did," I stammered, certain they wouldn't believe me.

And before I could say another word, Jeff, along with Rachel and Annula, rushed out after Arkadina.

"Given the current circumstances," Mirbek said, behind me, "SEP will not be able to represent you."

"I understand," I nodded. "I only ask that Narguiza be present with me at that hearing."

22. The Persecution

People, instead of obeying their heroes, prefer to be flattered
Plutarch

Bishkek, November 20, 2002

Yesterday I was stopped by two policemen while out for a walk around the city, hunting for old books. Luckily, I'd taken the precaution of bringing my French passport before leaving home that morning.

"A Black Frenchman?" the officer said, echoing Darixa's words from the start of the school year.

"You could check with Captain Sultan Usenov," I answered, "or call the French consul, Nazgul Lebedev."

The officers eyed me with hostility, but, faced with my composure, handed back my passport and told me I could go on my way.

Over lunch, Anaïs mentioned they were asking her for a date and a city for her return to the company. We argued about it heatedly.

"I'd prefer Paris," I told her.

"I'd prefer London."

"Of course it's your decision," I nodded, "but couldn't you give me the chance to travel with you to find work in France? As a French citizen, it would be easier for me to find work in Paris than as a foreigner in England."

"You've never wanted to speak to me in Spanish," she said, with a hint of selfishness, "and I've never agreed to speak to you in French. I'm certain that when we live in either of our countries, it'll cause problems in our relationship."

"Why?"

"Because we'll be in a culture that one of us can't fully understand, and the other can."

"And Berlin?"

"Impossible," she sighed. "Neither your German nor mine is fluent enough to live there."

"My old schoolmate Ferdinando worked in Hanover without knowing German. English is very common in German workplaces."

"I already told them we'd go to London," Anaïs stated. "What they want to know now is when we're traveling."

"August 2003, I suppose," I answered, resigned.

Bishkek, November 23, 2002

This afternoon Parvaneh invited us for a walk through the city's parks. I wasn't surprised to see her arrive with Vladimir, who, heedless of the late-autumn cold, wore a polo shirt and tight blue jeans that outlined the thick build of his arms and legs.

"Now I understand why we never see our driver anymore," Anaïs said, with a knowing smile.

"In this country everyone is free to work for whoever they please," Parvaneh replied, smiling.

"Especially when the pay is generous," I nodded.

"I see you've lost some weight," Parvaneh told me, patting my stomach.

"You were right," I nodded. "It was about time I got back to my exercises."

On the way, I told her about my run-in with the police and about Arkadina's plagiarism of my Faculty reform.

"I find it absurd that you get into trouble you could easily avoid."

"I haven't traveled halfway around the world to accept a bribe," I said. "Since when is it a crime to be honest?"

"How are your courses going?" Parvaneh asked Anaïs, not daring to answer me.

I appreciated Parvaneh for her sense of humor,

though I'd already noticed she didn't hold me in particularly high regard.

We took photos on the stones of a stream running down a lush ravine. From four o'clock on, as the evening shadows advanced, we watched, delighted, Parvaneh's acrobatics as she climbed up the steepest rocks, always calling for Vladimir's help. Vladimir would shoot us looks of impatience behind Parvaneh's back, which never stopped him from answering her calls, taking her by the waist, and slipping in a few discreet massages over her backside as he set her back down on solid ground.

"What would Werner say?" Anaïs asked, genuinely worried.

"What could he say?" I replied. "Werner has no intention of marrying Parvaneh."

"I have no doubt this fling will raise eyebrows in the local community."

"That's precisely the point," I answered.

"Ah?" Anaïs demanded an explanation.

"Don't forget I lived two years with a feminist," I said. "Parvaneh complains that this country is a paradise for Western men, free to pluck whatever flower they please without explanation. Voilà! Now she's the one plucking a geranium ten years fresher than she is."

Parvaneh and Vladimir's laughter faded behind some bushes until it vanished entirely.

"But I'm afraid she'll have to give explanations of her own," I said, walking toward the taxi and honking the horn. "We should go before nightfall. We have Film Club in a couple of hours."

Attendance at the screening of *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* exceeded every expectation. During the week I'd designed, printed, and distributed flyers around the university asking, in Russian and English: what is the fate of an honest man at a conference dominated by corruption and self-interest?

This time Petra delivered the introduction, which,

I already knew, would be an invective against my principles.

"Who's smarter?" she asked, rhetorically, glancing at Annula and Darixa in the front row. "The man who knows he's dealing with snakes and acts wisely, or the one who decides to expose them, only to be furiously bitten? We all want to change the world, but it's with our brains that we can act without destroying ourselves. As Benjamin Franklin used to say, watching a smart man fall is more common than people think; all it takes is one arrogant gesture or one unnecessary scandal for his peers to turn their backs on him.

"Mr. Smith believes himself in the right in this film, and indeed he is, but does that even matter? Do those who govern this world hold power because they are right, or because they hold on to power, often through concessions? Frank Capra teaches us a lesson in American pragmatism, showing us the sad fate of the man who believes himself more honest and truthful than everyone else.

"If they are right—which is entirely possible—they won't get to prove it in another world, if one even exists. Because, like Socrates, like Jesus Christ, like Joan of Arc, like Gandhi, every idealist in this world ends up stoned or crucified by his own fellow men. And I ask myself: is it worth provoking the wrath of our fellow citizens in the twenty-first century, by pointing out flaws that have already become part of our daily life? Isn't it better to accept that we are all imperfect, and to settle beneficially into those imperfections?

"Whoever fights against the political current today ends up, dear friends, unemployed, poor, and forgotten. Holding a job, building a career, and succeeding in life is a task requiring many sacrifices, including that of the morality and principles preached in the sacred books of religions like Catholicism and Islam.

"Today I think of Mr. Smith as a friend, and if he stood before me, as Marco Noël does right now, I would advise him to abandon his complaints and preserve, with cunning and clerical diplomacy, his job for at least six years—that is, the term for which his voters elected him. Thank you very much."

I smiled, doing my best not to show my displeasure at that elegy to conformity and corruption.

"Cardinal Mazarin couldn't have put it better," I told Petra, kissing her cheek.

"J'accepte tes reproches," she replied, "même injustifiés."

"Why don't you ever dare, as John Lennon once did, to dream of a better world?"

"Perhaps because I don't want to die shot on a New York sidewalk."

Bishkek, November 25, 2002

Leo took notes throughout the hearing with his usual monastic devotion. His pencil moved with the same precision it had shown taking notes in my classes on narrative structures and conflict as the unit of drama. Only once did he look up, when the email was passed through his hands. He looked at me almost involuntarily, believing he had made a mistake that could no longer be undone.

Arkadina walked into the room carrying a neatly printed sheet, which she handed to Popov. They exchanged several whispered words, with ministerial gravity.

"Before we continue," Popov said, "we have here a series of questions we'd like you to answer."

"Gladly," I replied, feeling a chill as I watched Arkadina leave the room.

"Is it true," he asked, in a voice feigning innocence but seeping venom, "that your own wife has accused you of lying?"

"False!" Anaïs cut in.

"In front of several colleagues," Popov insisted, "barely a few weeks ago?"

The silence tightened until it turned surgical. Every eye landed on me, and on Anaïs.

"What does that have to do with the bribe?" Anaïs asked.

"This isn't your interrogation," Utkin answered, as though stating a law of physics.

"If you keep interrupting us, we'll have to ask you to leave the room," Leo said, with a protocol-bound tone.

"I can defend myself," I told Anaïs, in French, to which she nodded, smiling faintly.

"A man who lies about small things," Magda said, "can lie about big things."

"My wife and I had a private argument," I said. "What she said in that moment was the fruit of a misunderstanding we've already resolved. As you can see, we are very close, and you will never hear her complain that her husband beats her, nor that he gets drunk on vodka, nor that he shoots up the heroin sold barely a few meters from here."

My words drew a spectral silence, and I could see, in the fixed pupils of my interlocutors, the same reverence that must have been felt by those who, stone in hand, were addressed two thousand years ago: *let him who is without sin cast the first stone*.

"Is it true you have never attended a single faculty meeting?" Popov continued.

"Narguiza, present here, can attest that Arkadina has scheduled them at the exact same time as SEP's mandatory lunches."

"Did you request a schedule change?"

"Yes, and I received no answer."

"Is it true you submitted your course plans past the deadline?"

"I submitted them at seven in the morning, on the

day of the deadline."

"Do you have the received stamp?"

"Right here," I said, searching through my documents.

I handed it over, and the committee members examined it, one by one, as though it were a counterfeit bill.

"Dates can be manipulated," Oleg said.

"So can grades," I said, drawing indignant looks.

"Is it true you mocked a student in a public email, calling him 'Zernebog Dostoevsky'?"

"He ended up being Fyodor Dostoevsky."

Oleg burst into laughter, which several members imitated, and then reined in under the shocked faces of Popov, Magda, and Dementiev.

"I assumed Zernebog was a fairly common name, and saw no problem using it for someone who, I was told, was the department's most popular student."

"But Zernebog is a wealthy student, a national celebrity, and you ridiculed him, showing him asking for financial aid."

"It was an example."

"An example ridiculing a student?"

"I never used his last name!"

"But his first name is unique!"

"How was I supposed to know that, when, by your own account, neither Russian nor Kyrgyz is my mother tongue?"

Everyone fell silent; the sword of Damocles they had wielded in their battle—that of communication breakdown across languages—now hung over their own heads.

"It's true this committee stands out for the absence of any Europeans or Americans to confirm my words, but you can ask any foreigner on this campus which names are Russian and which are Kyrgyz, and they simply won't know."

"What we already know," Dementiev said, closing his notebook with a dry snap, "is that you don't investigate before acting, that you're reckless, that you don't respect procedures."

"I appreciate this committee," I replied, with the calm of someone who already knows he carries a lit torch the lions fear in their own den, "interrogating me in English while also arguing that any communication in a language other than one's mother tongue is impossible."

A murmur, one I couldn't call indignation, spread among the judges.

"I accept that I must adapt to such keen linguistic observations, given the coexistence of the many languages that share the halls of the American University of Kyrgyzstan."

Popov tucked the sheet Arkadina had handed him back into his folder, accepting that all the pressure inflicted at this meeting had been refuted by their own precepts. He watched me, his eyes reddened, nodding in a sign of grudging, mischievous approval.

"Tarkovsky had already given me some sense of the Russian spirit in *Nostalgia*, in the scene where his lover tries to translate his father's poems into Italian.

"They are untranslatable!" bellows Tarkovsky's alter ego. Today I've learned that the people of Kyrgyzstan reject the possibility of communicating in any language besides Russian or Kyrgyz."

My reference to two mutually incompatible languages opened another wound in a population discriminated against by Mother Russia, under the very argument now being used against me.

"Is it true you're also learning Kyrgyz?" Professor Dementiev asked, in a conciliatory tone.

"Indeed," I nodded, "though my progress is modest."

"May we know your intent?" Popov asked.

I explained to them that each language offered a different vision of the world, since it was through language that we build the world itself.

"There's wisdom in the use of every grammar," I said, with growing enthusiasm, "not to say poetry. There is also wisdom in every single word. Don't you remember the character in Joyce's *Ulysses* who savors the word for 'sea' in Ancient Greek? You must read them in the original. Thalatta! Thalatta!"

"Now we understand your dedication to a language that matters so little in the West," Dementiev nodded, his gaze tamed. "I see you're also a poet."

"Every filmmaker is," I nodded.

"Around here, poets don't live past thirty," a shrill voice cut in.

I faced Magda's furious expression, which, with her stare, seemed to ask when I'd finally do them the favor of taking my own life.

"Because of social pressure," I answered, undeterred by her scorn. "I saw a documentary about the poets of Saint Petersburg; it's very sad how the State convinces them their lives must be tragic."

"We must return to our duties now," Popov declared. "We will discuss your statements and prepare a final report."

"I've learned a great deal today," I said, standing up, already thinking of my future novel.

Anaïs smiled, and, on our way out, before dozens of onlookers, she embraced me and kissed me defiantly on the mouth, showing off her pride.

"You proved you were completely right!" she exclaimed, in French.

"Why did you bring these two ladies to this hearing?" Dementiev asked, pointing at Anaïs and Narguiza.

"I wanted witnesses," I answered. "Narguiza is my supervisor at SEP, and Anaïs is my wife. I have no secrets

from her.”

“Anything else you’d like to say?” Popov asked.

“I believe I’ve been treated unjustly,” I answered, smiling, “no doubt because of my inexperience. But I hope that in the months to come, our relations will improve.”

The committee members watched me, eyes nearly bulging out of their sockets. If they believed they had tamed me, they now had the opposite impression.

Stepping out into the hallway, the door closed behind me with a sound I already knew well: that of matters being decided without my presence.

“How do you think it went?” Narguiza asked.

“Excellent,” I answered. “As though nothing had happened.”

Narguiza nodded, in apparent support. We walked in silence to the exit.

Crossing the hallway back to the main exit, Leo passed by me. We were headed in opposite directions, and for a moment we stood level with one another, in front of the portraits of the former rectors staring at us with their oil-painted eyes.

“I didn’t know about the envelope,” he said, quietly, without stopping.

Getting home, I got a call from Rachel, who, after apologizing on Annula’s behalf for her lack of skill at her own job, confirmed that Anaïs would also be traveling with me to Osh.

“I want to highlight,” she warned me, “Annula’s good will, since, as SEP’s director, she’s under no obligation to invite our academics’ partners on these trips. If I ever told you we’d be inviting your wife, it was because I was the director back then.”

“I’m grateful,” I said, not daring to dispute her self-praise.

Bishkek, November 30, 2002

Today we were invited to breakfast by George and Winona Dyke, honorary professors from the University of Iowa. The invitation was at their apartment, a spacious place downtown they’d decorated with dark wood furniture brought from the United States. On the walls, engravings of the American prairie hung beside photographs of smiling Kyrgyz students. On a shelf, a collection of matryoshka dolls Winona had been buying at the bazaars.

They were a couple in their sixties, he with silver hair and a trimmed beard, she with short hair and black-rimmed glasses that gave her the air of a stern but kind librarian. They wore comfortable but impeccable clothing: wool jackets, corduroy trousers, leather shoes that creaked as they walked. Everything about them radiated the calm of people who have built a career, raised children, and now travel the world in a kind of second youth.

Breakfast was simple: freshly brewed coffee, whole-grain bread, apricot jam, yogurt. None of the milky tea I’d been served in other Kyrgyz homes, nor the first-thing-in-the-morning vodka the Russians offered. George and Winona were old-school Americans: they believed in conversation as a vehicle for understanding.

After exchanging impressions of Kyrgyzstan—the cold, the hospitality, the insidious corruption—I realized Annula had sent them. More than a social visit, it was an inspection. The Dykes were envoys from Budapest, judges appointed to determine whether Marco Saint-André was a dangerous agitator, or simply a man of inconvenient principles.

Far from being intimidated, I enjoyed the conversation with two professors deeply versed in philosophy, sociology, literature, and history. George turned out to be a great reader of Samuel Beckett, so we spent a while discussing the character of Pozzo, the dictator of *Waiting for Godot*.

“Do you see Pozzo as a tyrant, or as a victim of his

own power?" George asked me, spreading jam on his bread.

"Both," I answered. "Like everyone who wields power without accountability. The whip he uses on Lucky is the same one that, by the play's end, leaves him blind and helpless. Power protects the one who wields it, but it also isolates him."

"Great reading," Winona said, nodding slowly, not in agreement but in verification. "I love it."

Judging by his analytical looks, George couldn't believe there were people in the city who doubted my intellectual abilities and academic preparation. At one point, discussing the dialectic between oppressor and oppressed in Beckett's work, George rested his hand on my forearm and said:

"You're not what I was told."

"That I was a stubborn inquisitor?"

George and Winona laughed, delighted.

"That you were a difficult man," George nodded.

"That you didn't respect local customs. That you saw corruption where there was only... how did they put it?... 'different cultural practices.'"

"And you," Anaïs cut in, "now that you've met us, what do you think?"

George gave a tired smile; I gathered he'd seen too much of the world to be surprised by anything anymore, but still retained his curiosity.

"I think you're a man who tells the truth, and that, in certain contexts, is the most subversive behavior there is."

Winona, who had been listening silently, cleared her throat and changed the subject. Not abruptly, but with that determination of someone who knows there are questions that shouldn't be asked in front of the staff, even when the staff are merely the walls.

"We're the ones in charge of renewing the

American University of Kyrgyzstan's scholarship program," she told us, confidentially, leaning slightly forward, as though about to entrust us with a state secret. "Is there any recommendation you'd like to make to us?"

I immediately sensed that Darixa had warned them my recommendation would be to cancel the scholarships altogether. Or something worse: that my recommendation would be to expose the system's corruption, forcing the Dykes to take a side. They expected to find me caught in a dilemma: to stay true to my accusation, or to accept the scholarships' renewal, thereby proving that Mr. Smith had learned how to behave, thanks to the lessons in pragmatism Petra had given him.

But it wasn't only the Dykes watching me; I felt the Creator himself pulling the strings of an encounter none of us had planned.

"My recommendation," I answered, weighing every word, "is that the committees awarding scholarships include at least one American. The locals reproduce, almost against their own will, the rotten customs of the Stalinist era. It's not that they're bad people; it's that they've been shaped by a system where loyalty to one's superior matters more than honesty toward process. But they won't dare voice their corrupt practices even in front of a U.S. citizen. An American in the room acts as a mirror: it forces them to see themselves. Besides, it would help address the absence of Chinese scholarship students. Did you know the Chinese are the most discriminated-against diaspora, as we've noticed, among the students here?"

Winona wrote something in a small black notebook. George nodded, a gesture I couldn't read at the time—approval? skepticism?—but which I later understood as recognition.

We kept talking about life at American universities. George asked me about Temple, about Philadelphia, about the professors I'd had. Winona wanted to know how I'd met Anaïs. The morning unfolded with a naturalness that

contrasted with the underlying tension I myself had carried into the meeting.

When breakfast ended, around ten, George proposed a walk.

"The sky's clear," he said, looking out the window. "Hasn't snowed in two days. Why don't we go to Ala-Archa? I know a flat rock where you can see the whole valley. We could bring something to eat."

"A picnic," Winona said, her voice lighting up with a youthful enthusiasm I hadn't seen in her before. "We haven't had a picnic in weeks."

"We haven't prepared anything," I objected.

"We'll figure that out," George said, taking his jacket off the hook. "The important thing is to get out."

Ala-Archa, at that hour of the morning, was deserted. The fresh snow covered the trails in a virgin layer that crunched under our feet. George walked ahead, with a firm step, as though he knew every stone along the way. Winona followed, a wicker basket that had appeared from some cupboard now hanging from her arm. Anaïs and I brought up the rear, hand in hand, in that complicit silence that sometimes settles between spouses when there's no need to speak.

We already knew the rock, a motherly slab of grey granite rising from the hillside like a table set by nature itself. Bishkek, in the distance, was a grey smudge against the snow, and beyond it, as far as the eye could see, the white steppe blending into the sky.

George spread a blanket over the rock. Winona laid out the contents of the basket: bread, cheese, a thermos of coffee, a few red apples that looked pulled from a Dutch still life. It wasn't a rich man's picnic, but it had the elegance of carefully made food.

We sat on the blanket, all four of us, legs crossed or stretched out depending on each person's flexibility. The November sun was mild but not warm, and the air

smelled of pine and fresh snow. For a moment, everything seemed normal: two American couples enjoying a day in the mountains, far from the intrigues and bribes simmering in the city below.

But George hadn't come only to sightsee.

"Marco," George said, after a long silence, turning an apple core between his hands, "when Annula invited us to Bishkek, she told us about you. She said you were brilliant, but difficult. That you didn't understand certain local customs and saw conspiracies where sometimes there was only administrative clumsiness."

Winona kept her eyes fixed on the valley.

"And what do you two think now?" I asked.

George smiled, wearily.

"I think we were given a very incomplete version of your story."

"And that your university has deeper problems than its administrators are willing to admit," Winona added, cautiously.

"Will you do anything?" Anaïs asked.

George took his time answering.

"I can't promise revolutions. Foundations are also full of bureaucrats who prefer quiet reports. But I can promise we'll ask uncomfortable questions. Sometimes that's more than people expect."

Winona closed the wicker basket and stood up.

"And your recommendation about the scholarship committees struck us as reasonable."

George looked at me one last time before starting the descent.

"Just be careful, Marco. You're walking through a minefield."

The sun had risen higher, and the valley stretched before us, white and immense.

We came down from the mountain at dusk. The sun set behind the peaks, painting the snow pink and orange. George and Winona walked ahead, arm in arm,

their silhouettes cut against the horizon.

We never saw George and Winona again. They left Bishkek the following day, Narguiza told me, without saying goodbye; old-school Americans who didn't make scenes, fulfilled their mission, and left.

Bishkek, December 4, 2002

The appeals committee issued its ruling. I read it in Narguiza's office, who handed it to me with an expression of silent apology:

"Given that English is neither Professor Saint-André's mother tongue, nor Zernebog Tripov's, we establish that this was a cultural misunderstanding. We recommend that Professor Saint-André show greater respect for local customs, and that, before issuing accusations that compromise not only the University but also its leadership, he consult with faculty whose mother tongue is English."

"So they write to you in English to tell you that you don't know English?" Anaïs asked, mockingly, when I told her about it.

"They're absurd," I said, "and openly so, in this very document. The Dykes issued a favorable assessment of my command of the language. That reins in their more grotesque accusations."

"Since you mention it," Anaïs said, finishing her coffee, "yesterday I had coffee with Hun-Sue in the afternoon."

"I'm glad her company has replaced Whitney's," I remarked.

"Her application for a half scholarship next semester got approved."

"Really?" I said, smiling.

"I couldn't hide from her that it was thanks to your efforts."

"Well..."

"I know you weren't thinking of her specifically. But you have no idea how happy she is. She told me, in tears, that in the three years she's been studying, she's been treated with disdain, and that now, not only her, but six other Chinese students got half scholarships based on their academic averages."

"That should be the criterion," I nodded.

I've decided to let Zernebog's attempted bribe go. That afternoon I learned, from Olga, that Mrs. Ivanoff, the very woman I'd replaced, and who had once challenged me in front of the whole faculty, had accepted Zernebog's offer of an intensive private course for four hundred dollars.

"At least," I told her, "I won't leave with the guilt of having taken away the livelihood of an ancien régime professor."

Bishkek, December 6, 2002

The city is covered not only in a thick blanket of snow, but also in a cloud of steam and coal ash.

"It's typical in every Soviet city," Venkatesh explained to me in a university corridor. He wore his brown corduroy jacket, the same one as always, and his round glasses, which gave him the air of a European sixties-film intellectual. He spoke with his hands, as usual, but I noticed his gestures were broader than necessary today, as though he wanted to fill up the space so as not to have to meet my eyes. "The heating system that started running last week gives off a thick cloud of steam and residue. When the wind blows toward the city, the cloud inevitably settles over us."

"Isn't that harmful to your health?" Anaïs asked.

"Not at all," Venkatesh smiled, and his smile was that of a doctor reassuring a patient before bad news. "In fact, tomorrow we're going out for laghman. Come with us, and you'll see how fun it is to walk through that synthetic fog."

The fog, I thought, was too convenient a metaphor for what we were living through. But I said nothing. By this point, I'd already learned that Venkatesh wasn't a man for uncomfortable metaphors.

Anaïs excused herself to go to the bathroom, and we were left alone.

"Are you aware of the workplace harassment this faculty has been waging against me?"

Venkatesh took advantage of the moment to drop his innocent smile, as though he'd been waiting for the chance.

"You know, Marco," he said, leaning a shoulder against the wall, adopting that relaxed posture he used when he wanted an important conversation to seem like a minor remark, "I've been reflecting on your stance. On this whole bribery business. And honestly, I admire it. Truly. Not everyone would take the risk you have."

It was his usual way of opening: a pat on the back, an acknowledgment, a "but" that hadn't arrived yet but was already announcing itself in his tone.

"Thank you," I answered.

"But"—there it was—"I also think your ethics are a bit... how do I put it?... naïve."

The word fell between us like a pebble into a pond. Venkatesh pronounced it softly, almost tenderly, as though he regretted having to say it at all. He was a man of delicate voice, our nice boy from India, educated in Birmingham and trained in political science. He'd read enough to turn any conversation into a seminar, and his specialty was never fully committing to anything.

"Naïve?" I repeated, not offended yet, but with the curiosity of someone who knows a long argument is coming.

"Yes. You believe truth, by the mere fact of being true, will prevail. That honesty is some universal currency everyone recognizes and values. But history doesn't work

that way. History is full of truths buried and lies turned into dogma. Your ethical paradigm is too... Christian, if you'll allow me to say so."

"I'm not offended that you'd say that," I answered. "I am Christian."

"I know. But that's exactly the problem. You believe in individual redemption, in the conversion of the heart. I believe in structures, in systems, in the materiality of power relations. You think you can change a university by confronting one corrupt student. I think societies only change when the material conditions sustaining them change. They're two different paradigms. Yours is noble, but mine is... realistic."

I looked at him for a moment. He spoke with that professorial authority of the British who have read so much they can no longer listen without correcting. He was the same Venkatesh who, before the salt was even passed, would quote Marx at me, but who now, faced with my own case, took refuge in realism.

"Let me ask you something, Venkatesh," I said, and he nodded, with a slight tilt of the head that already anticipated tedium. "You quote Marx. You say structures are all that matter. But without individuals who rebel against those structures, do they ever change on their own?"

"It's not that simple."

"Of course it's not simple. Kosík already pointed that out; but you sidestep his objections. Who changed South Africa's apartheid system? The structures alone, or were there individuals who said 'no'?"

"That's a fallacy," Venkatesh answered, his voice tensing slightly. "Mandela wasn't alone. There was a party, an organization, an international context. You are not Mandela. And this isn't apartheid."

"No, it isn't. But the principle is the same: someone has to say no."

"Saying no has consequences. Are you willing to

accept them? Because your speech never mentions that. It talks about courage, truth, principles. But it doesn't mention that your principles could cost you your job, your stability, your relationship with your wife..."

"My relationship with my wife?" I interrupted him, surprised by the turn.

"I've heard you two argue. That she wants to go to London and you want to stay. That you can't agree. And all of this"—he made a broad gesture, taking in the hallway, the university, the fog—"doesn't help."

"You underestimate the love we share."

"What intrigues us is that she also believes in God."

Venkatesh thus revealed to me that every attack against me had been sanctioned by his own philosophy. And that I had, until then, believed in his disguise of concern and false friendship.

"So you've already taken your side," I said. "You're well informed, then, that they tried to burn us alive in our own apartment."

"What stopped them from doing it? Luck?"

"You may call it that, but you know that, for those of us who believe, everything is written by God."

Venkatesh bared his teeth, the way he did in his own classes whenever some religious figure came up.

"You think you can separate professional ethics from personal life. I don't think you can. And there's your naïveté: believing you can play the hero without paying a price that isn't only your own."

"You knew they'd already caused one short circuit, and you let it happen again, even knowing we could have been killed."

The silence stretched on. The fog drifted in through the poorly sealed windows, and the smell of phosphorus and sulfur grew heavier. I remembered then a conversation we'd had weeks earlier, in his apartment,

about the parable of the talents.

"You believe in the Gospels," he said, changing register.

I looked at him, puzzled.

"Yes."

"You'll remember that servant who buries his talent out of fear and is punished. What kind of god punishes someone who simply doesn't take a risk, and, out of caution, keeps what he was given intact, to return it as is?"

"It isn't fear that moves him," I answered. "It's prudence, laziness, cowardice. The point isn't that God wants everyone to become millionaires. God gives us the world and expects us to improve it—that's why, in my case, He gave me a sense of honesty. If I bury that honesty out of fear of losing my job, I'll be like that servant, and at the end of time, what will I say to Him when He shows me the treasures of eternity? That I never used your talent because thousands like you, and every professor the Soros Foundation sends to these regions, under the pretense of being honest and incorruptible, had already buried it, choosing instead to live off the injustices suffered by the most defenseless?"

"You're mixing theology with politics."

"I'm proving they go together. You quote Marx, and it bothers you that I quote Jesus. But only one of them spoke of justice; the other spoke of tyranny in the name of pretty words that never actually held up in reality. Marx longed for the French Revolution, and that's why he preached that revolution had to be violent, burying, in the process, the very gift of compassion that both you and I also carry."

Venkatesh fell silent, with the smile of a spoiled, mischievous child. It was his favorite defense mechanism whenever the discussion grew too uncomfortable, as though a false little wink of mischief were already an answer.

"You know I admire you," he said finally, and his voice had lost some of its usual confidence. "But you also know I can't openly support you."

"Really, you're the ones who ought to carry the guilt of our deaths for the rest of your lives," I said, "but it was Jesus, in His mercy, who has given you a second chance."

"By the very fact that you're here, standing up to Arkadina, doing what you're doing, you're already asking me to take a side. And I can't. Not now."

"Did you hear what I told you?"

"When conditions are more favorable. When there are more people willing. When..."

"There won't be a third chance," I cut him off. "By the end of your lives, already old and sick, dependent on others, you won't be able to, and that's what," Muhammad said, referring to those who were truly kind, and who will be cast aside along with all those who chose, like the cynical Voltaire, to leave the world just as perverse and twisted as they found it..."

"But I don't believe in God."

"A criminal saying he doesn't believe in judges or the law doesn't exempt him from judgment in the end."

Venkatesh looked at me, and the certainty in my words—which weren't really mine, but inspired by the Spirit—unsettled him. For a moment I saw in his eyes the fear of someone glimpsing that God and eternity are not a fable, but the reality he had always strained to deny.

What did I feel for him then? Pity? But that moment of helplessness gave way to the recognition that I had said something he could not refute, but was also unwilling to accept.

"You're a dangerous man, Marco," he said, finally, with a smile that didn't reach his eyes. "To the system, I mean. When people lose their fear, order starts to wobble."

"And is that a bad thing?"

Venkatesh didn't answer. He checked his watch, a gesture I already recognized: his signal to leave, that the conversation had reached a point he couldn't sustain without compromising himself.

"I have to go," he said, and his voice now belonged to the official keeping to his schedule. "I have class in a few minutes."

"In those very classes, my dear Venkatesh, you admire those who take risks, but you don't take any yourself; you criticize the corrupt, but you don't expose them; you defend truth in theory, but wash your hands of it in practice."

Venkatesh stood still for a few seconds. Then, without a word, he kept walking.

Anaïs came back, and we headed home; the grey fog was thick, smelling of phosphorus, thinning the air over Bishkek's streets and parks.

"What did you and Venkatesh talk about?" she asked me.

"I told him he was complicit in our deaths."

"Oh, la la!" she smiled. "And did you tell him God had saved us?"

"It was like talking to a stone. I told him he'd found, in his analysis of secular corrupt structures, an excuse to never act."

Anaïs looked at me with that expression of hers, asking whether my interlocutor had taken my remarks as praise or as an insult.

"An insult," I answered. "He's a coward, coddled by this system."

I took her arm, and we walked on through the dense grey fog, the curtain of an unforgettable play that refused to rise.

Bishkek, December 8, 2002

We went out with Marcello and Petra. They told us Whitney had already traveled to Vienna, with a special

permit from Annula and Rector Gulmat.

"What you can achieve when you're on good terms with the authorities," Petra remarked.

"We only have one week of exams left," Venkatesh said, "and by Friday, every one of our SEP colleagues will have traveled to Europe or the United States."

"We Saint-Andrés aren't traveling to France," Petra said.

"Why not?" Venkatesh asked.

"We've decided to spend a Kyrgyz Christmas instead," Anaïs sighed.

"I'm going to smoke a cigarette," Marcello said, excusing himself. "Back in five minutes."

"I'll join him," I said, taking the chance to escape those life lessons. "I want to look at the fog."

Once outside, Marcello told me Rector Gulmat was furious over the questions my case had stirred up among the Dykes. It seemed Gulmat had tried to turn them against me, but the Dykes' response was a call to reason, pointing out that not every professor they brought in needed to be American-born.

"There's something else I want you to know," he told me, his voice dropping. "During my class last week, Professor Dementiev walked in with a folder of grades. Gulmat took him to her desk and exchanged a few words with him, turning up the volume on her sound system, which was playing some popular song. For some strange reason, they assumed my Russian wasn't advanced enough to understand them. The thing is, I understood clearly that Dementiev was telling the rector this was the final list of grades for students who had contracted independent courses."

"Impossible," I replied. "Final exams are this week."

"Exactly," Marcello nodded. "But that's not the worst part. Gulmat then called the systems administrator,

a man named Bashirov, and instructed him to collect the grades in order to alter the partial grades already entered into the system."

"Why are you telling me all this, Marcello?" I asked, after a brief pause.

The synthetic fog had grown even thicker, carrying a faint smell of phosphorus and sulfur. We could barely make out each other's faces.

"Because I consider you the only professor with principles at this university," he told me.

"Our language professors aren't corrupt," I replied.

"Because they've never been given the opportunity," he insisted. "You're the only one who can bring about positive change in this world. You remind me of an uncle who died at an anti-communist protest in the former Czechoslovakia."

"You have no idea how relieved I am to hear that," I said, my voice trembling. "So many voices reproach me for not having accepted that bribe, and so many people refuse to greet me in the university hallways, that I've come to wonder whether I'm suffering from some kind of madness."

"You're a Don Quixote fighting goblins and giants," Marcello smiled. "At most they might accuse you of being deranged, but never dishonorable, never a liar."

Bishkek, December 14, 2002

The semester ended with no other news than Irina's abrupt withdrawal, who decided to take the personalized course taught by Professor Ivanoff, alongside Zernebog. Her transfer was unnecessary—all she needed to do to pass my course was submit a final essay—but, besides being a slap in my face, it also somehow validated Zernebog's private course, freeing it from the grim suspicion that such intensive courses never actually took place at all, and consisted simply of a monetary arrangement between a professor and a student. After all,

the university had no way of verifying whether they were held, theoretically, at the professor's or the student's home.

Arkadina has consolidated her power at the university on the strength of her proposal to reform the Communications Department—the same one she stole from me. Yesterday she sent me a letter regretting to inform me that my services as a professor were no longer required for the Faculty's core courses; however, she added, my elective courses on Screenwriting and Media Management had reached the required quorum of six students, so I needed to submit the syllabi to her no later than Tuesday.

Almost immediately I received an email from Ulrika Devyatkin, inviting me to teach a course on the History of Mass Media at the Faculty of Anglo-American Studies.

Bishkek, December 16, 2002

Free of obligations and commitments, we bought capons, wines, and hams for the Christmas novena, and devoted ourselves to living *La Dolce Vita*: eating at home, reading nonstop, wrapped in the finest classical concerts, going out for walks along Bishkek's snow-covered streets.

Anaïs is devouring the Agatha Christie novels I bought from Amazon Germany for the course I'll no longer be teaching. Her enthusiasm is such that I don't dare show her the essay in which I reveal the formula behind most of her novels: the culprit, with exceptions that prove the rule, is invariably the one Agatha presents as the least likely suspect.

As for me, I finished the first volume of Proust, reread the *Commedia*, and picked up the volume of *El Ingenioso Hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha* from the Aguilar edition of Cervantes's Complete Works.

I hadn't reread it since my adolescence, and, since, according to Petra, Marcello, and other academics, my

behavior borders on the madness of those who wish to right the wrongs of this world, I sank into that world of ogres, goblins, and malevolent sorceresses, convinced this time that Don Quixote was right, and that the truly mentally ill were those incapable of understanding the noble motivations of the Ingenious Hidalgo of La Mancha.

23. Christmas in Bishkek

*The stomach's rippling orb enraged the squire,
who averted each offer with a hardening smile at this bulk,
obese and turgid as his Empire.*

Derek Walcott

Bishkek, December 23, 2002

We celebrated the Christmas novena, tormented, if anything, by Michelle's foolish complaints, who, from France, keeps asking me why, unlike other academics working for SEP, we haven't managed to secure tickets to join them in Besançon. The one most affected by these conversations is Anaïs, who no longer hides her sad expression as we walk through the streets of Bishkek.

Yesterday we took a Polaroid photo with a local Santa Claus, dressed in a dark blue suit; when they handed me the picture, I felt a stab in my chest: the contrast between my cheerful face and Anaïs's, on which she wore a strained, pained smile, led me to reflect on the fragility of our relationship. How was it possible that I was happy in her exclusive company, and she was not? Why should her feelings remain subject to her mother's overpowering will?

I remembered Kundera, who warned men they would never find happiness in a woman. If happiness were mutual, I thought, love would be reciprocal. "But I love her," I told myself, consoling myself with the thought that she loved me too, even if she loved her mother more.

My father, adding fuel to the fire, called to ask whether the work troubles I was having weren't my own fault, for failing to show meekness and humility toward my superiors. I reminded him that he himself had lost his position as a surveyor with the government, years earlier, for having backed the dismissal of a corrupt union

representative. After warning me he wouldn't be able to help if I found myself out of work, he wished us a merry Christmas and a happy new year.

Bishkek, December 26, 2002

We spent Christmas at Tatiana and José's house, who prepared one of the most delicious roast pigs I've ever tasted in my life, comparable perhaps only to Anaïs's grandmother's wild boar in truffle sauce. That morning I bought two bottles of vodka and half a box of fireworks to liven up the evening, and José picked us up in his Lada around four in the afternoon, in front of our housing complex.

"And Uriel and Heidi?" Anaïs asked.

"They decided to travel to Ecuador at the last minute," José said. "A real shame."

"Is Uriel Catholic?" Anaïs asked.

"What do you think?" José nodded.

"After all," I said, "our own Gentile ancestors were converts too."

Leaving the city, we were stopped by a police patrol; two officers got out and called José aside. After talking with them for several minutes, we saw him hurry back to the car, pulling a synthetic leather wallet from the glove compartment. He rejoined them for a couple more minutes and, coming back, told us he'd had to pay them a two-hundred-som bribe to keep them from impounding the car, since not all his paperwork was up to date.

Arriving at his cabin, nestled on the slope of a cold mountain about thirty minutes from Bishkek, Tatiana didn't hold back, in Russian, her displeasure upon learning we hadn't contributed to the bribe; luckily Anaïs still couldn't follow the conversation, and I pretended not to understand either, so as not to ruin the evening.

On one hand, it wasn't my place to answer for a car's expired paperwork, and on the other, Anaïs and I had already decided to leave José and his family most of our

clothes and winter coats when we headed back to the West.

We talked about Tomás's future, who had chopped the firewood for the bonfire; José told me he wanted to send him to the USA for vacation in May and June, taking advantage of the law allowing any Cuban to acquire American citizenship; I jokingly warned him that, over there, a minor could become independent from parental authority whenever he pleased; I added that I'd also read of children suing their parents for putting them to work without fair compensation, like Gary Coleman, the boy from *Diff'rent Strokes*, who sued his parents for taking the money he'd earned as an actor without giving him, as he saw it, his fair share.

José turned sour, insisting Tomás would never behave that way with his family. My intention had been to point out that American society wasn't necessarily the best model, but José took it as a criticism of the work discipline he demanded from his son.

We set off fireworks that broke the silence of the night, and ate and drank to our limit. Around five in the morning we went to bed in the guest room. It was hard to fall asleep, since the thick wool blanket on the bed reeked of stale sweat.

"The Soviets considered soap a capitalist excess," I explained to Anaïs, "and, in a way, they were right. Think of the tons of pollutants we dump every day in detergents and cleaning products."

"Christmas isn't really celebrated in this region," Anaïs replied. "Did you notice we didn't see any other fireworks besides ours?"

"Don't forget we're in a Muslim country."

Over the following days, Anaïs and I built the paradise of Byzantine novels: cooking, reading, walking through the park, listening to music, playing the piano, writing poems, and making love.

Bishkek, January 5, 2003

On the afternoon of the 31st, we were preparing a roast chicken when we received a visit from Izatbek, which surprised and pleased us at once. As we talked about Kyrgyzstan's recent history, I gathered that Edward had sent her to find out who we were, how we lived, and what our interests in the region really were.

Gossip has that particular quality of stirring up both hostility and sympathy at once. What would they say now, knowing our New Year's celebration had been modest, dancing to Colombian music, drinking a bottle of wine and half a bottle of vodka? When Izatbek mentioned that, after the Soviet Union's collapse, the country had ground to a halt and supplies had grown scarce, I asked her how they had endured it, to which she only smiled, and, without giving me details, said they simply had. I remembered the testimonies of the survivors of Leningrad and Stalingrad during the German sieges and understood that pressing the subject further would be indelicate.

"How's Edward?" Anaïs asked, pouring a glass of wine.

"He spends every Christmas with his siblings in America," she answered, her voice trembling. "You see, on his way back to Seattle, with a layover in Budapest, Edward met with SEP's board of directors. This morning I spoke with him for several hours. He knows the proposal to reform the Communications Department wasn't Arkadina's idea, but yours."

"Edward was at that meeting," I said, stunned. "I remember now."

"Right now, Arkadina is considered, in Budapest, the finest example of what the Soros Foundation has cultivated in these former Soviet republics," Izatbek went on, visibly embarrassed.

"A kind of Pygmalion," I nodded.

"I saw the play," Izatbek nodded. "I know what you mean. Yes, in a way, they believe Arkadina is an Eliza

Doolittle who has come of age. Edward, who, like any good man, looks after not only his beloved's future, but also that of my family and my nation, hasn't dared tear down the house of cards the university's leadership has built around Arkadina's persona, but..."

"Yes?" I pressed, sensing where her speech was headed.

"To be honest, Edward is deeply concerned about the recommendations Arkadina submitted to the Soros Foundation about SEP's future, during her most recent visit."

"What did she say?" Anaïs asked, with a hint of indignation.

"That SEP should shut down," I answered.

"How do you know?" Izatbek asked, surprised.

"It's obvious her campaign started last year," I answered, "when, with the help of one of the department's brightest students, a group of Russophiles tried to present SEP as an entity importing homosexuality—that is, indecency and decadence—into this country. But they failed, since they hadn't anticipated that not only SEP, but also the University and the U.S. government, would be accused of complicity. What that group couldn't stand, and still can't, is the presence of foreigners benefiting from the funds these NGOs invest in this country's education. Aren't we, they say, intelligent enough to run our own research and teaching?"

"The problem, they claim, isn't a lack of brains, but unemployment. Isn't it enough, they ask indignantly, that we go to the USA for two or three semesters, to learn the American ideals of freedom and free trade that, we're told, are essential to our region's development?"

"Knowledge, after all, is regarded by the Soviet intelligentsia as accessory, a scholar's vanity the Internet is already replacing. They believe, as bishops and politicians believe, that truth and intelligence lie in hypocrisy, deceit,

and cunning, not in respect for values that, they insist, belong only to idiots, as Dostoevsky already showed us.

"Arkadina has requested, on the strength of the grant she secured for her department's development, that the Soros organization's program for importing academics be canceled, and has asked instead that all the money be invested in training her own students and faculty."

"You must have already been informed," Izatbek said, deeply concerned.

"Are you surprised?" Anaïs asked, proudly.

"Edward believes Arkadina's request will be approved," she said, "especially since SEP is already reeling from last semester's scandal."

"But there's an ethical variable neither Arkadina nor the Budapest bureaucrats have foreseen: buried corruption will come to light and eat away at the dignity built through hypocrisy. Without international academics, the university will face another crisis, in which I'll play a role in absentia. Aren't I already called foolish for considering a private course a bribe? That question assumes the university is honest and that my error was one of interpretation, not of fact. Once the Soros Foundation backs only locals, bribes will be discussed as something permissible, but that won't be accepted by the young people already educated by SEP's international diaspora."

"And what could happen then?" Izatbek asked, eyes expectant.

"A scandal," I answered, "and this time, one strong enough to shake the very families that govern this country."

"And doesn't he hate us for it?"

"Not at all," I smiled. "In fact, we already have plans to move back to England."

"I'm relieved to know Arkadina's scheming won't affect your future."

Izatbek stayed with us until two in the morning, when we went to sleep.

We had survived 2002.

Bishkek, January 10, 2003

I wept with Sancho Panza over Don Quixote's death. Open, inconsolable tears, like those of a child who has lost his best friend. I had finished the Aguilar edition—the one from Cervantes's Complete Works, hardcover, with yellowed pages that smelled of an old library—and set the book down on the breakfast table, its final line still vibrating in my memory: that Don Quixote was born for him alone, and he for Don Quixote; he knew how to act, and he knew how to write it.

Anaïs watched me over her coffee cup, with that mix of tenderness and complicity she reserved for my most intense moments.

"Did it move you that much?" she asked.

I nodded, my eyes watery.

"It's because you've spent almost a year confronting the world's injustices," Anaïs went on, with her sensed frankness. "Don Quixote sees giants where others see windmills. You saw bribes where others saw remedial courses."

I took her hand, feeling a growing emotion; why could Cervantes still move us so, five centuries after his Knight Errant's death?

"Don Quixote exalts justice in a world that no longer believes in it."

Anaïs smiled and picked up the book from the table.

"And you, truth, in a world that has made scheming its habit."

She opened it to the chapter of the windmills.

"That's the difference between you and him," she said, with that intuition of hers that always surprised me. "Don Quixote charges the windmills believing them giants, but you and I know our own ogres were real; we've seen

them, they've attacked us, and you've scattered them, stung by the wasps of their own confusion. Look at what Cervantes writes when he describes the barber's basin: 'I know who I am,' he answers, 'and I know I can be not only who I say, but every knight in the world.'"

"There," Anaïs said, closing the book with a gentle tap. "Don Quixote needs to believe he's a knight to become one. You don't need to believe anything; you already know who you are. Those giants you face—Arkadina, Magda, Tom, Venkatesh, Utkin, Dementiev—they exist, and you've unmasked them, showing their behavior for what it is: ogres, sorceresses, and goblins. You've lost, they say, the way those who beat Don Quixote believed they had defeated him, but that knight's dignity was as great as yours; no one ever saw you falter, never saw you weep at their feet or beg them to stop their attacks. What you've done, my Marquis, no one can ever undo."

She came closer, smiled, and I took her in my arms; we rolled, laughing, across the wooden floor, and I stayed there, looking into her beautiful eyes, her delicate face.

I stroked her cheek; the sound of our laughter filled the kitchen and gradually chased away my sorrow over Don Quixote.

"Do you know what amazes me most about you, Marco?" she said, reaching for her cup and turning back to me. "That you're not afraid. Because Don Quixote was afraid—you could feel it in his hesitations, in his moments of doubt, in Sancho's warnings. But you aren't."

"They did make me doubt," I answered. "Do you remember the day I asked you whether I might be wrong, and whether Zernebog's offer of an extracurricular course wasn't a bribe after all, but simply a transaction?"

"Yes."

"It was because of so many voices telling me that what I saw as black wasn't black but white, and not only the locals, but especially Petra and Venkatesh, Europeans I once respected. But know that in that fight, you were also

with me, and that it was you, with your fierce correction, who acted as the angel bringing me back to my ethical bearings of truth and justice.”

“Oh!” Anaïs exclaimed, moved.

“My faith in the truth was yours too, the same faith Don Quixote shares with Sancho when Sancho advises him prudence: it’s clear you haven’t read the histories, where it’s told that many knights have thrown themselves into similar adventures and come out well; and I, who have read them more than you, know that none of them ever ended badly, so long as the knight’s faith did not fail.”

“And so it was,” Anaïs applauded, moved, “despite the fires, the threats, their scheming, their unjust trials, our faith has never once failed us.”

Anaïs came close and embraced me; I felt her hair against my cheek, her warmth against my chest.

“And now our happy ending is London,” I whispered. “With you.”

We kissed while the snow kept falling over Bishkek, as though the whole universe were celebrating our lost battle.

Bishkek, January 19, 2003

I continued studying Russian, Kyrgyz, and Uzbek extensively.

“Uzbek?” Anaïs asked, puzzled, seeing me with the grammar book.

“It’s very similar to Kyrgyz,” I nodded, closing the volume to show her the cover. “Don’t look at me as though I’m wasting my time.”

“It’s not that!” she corrected me. “It’s that I’m making a chicken à l’ancienne.”

I opened a bottle of Jura wine and joined her in the kitchen.

“God willing, I hope to learn a new language every year,” we toasted. “Knowledge is my weapon, my love,

and, as long as I can keep acquiring it, my struggle will not cease.”

“Venkatesh asked me the other day whether I wasn’t afraid they’d kill you,” Anaïs replied, with a look of discomfort. “I told him neither you nor I believed we were in danger; and when I told him it was because God protected us, he nearly had a cardiac episode. Verrückt!”

I laughed, knowing our mysticism was incomprehensible to a world mired in its fear of death, unemployment, hunger, and destitution.

We kept talking in German, which we now practiced as our household’s lingua franca, replacing English.

Bishkek, January 22, 2003

Our colleagues are returning from their vacations in Europe, and everything is going back to normal, if I can even call this post-Soviet hell “normal”; we already have our flight reservations for mid-February, for our trip to Osh, the capital of the country’s south, which nonetheless holds Uzbekistan’s traditions and people.

“You have no idea how much I admire you,” Anaïs told me one ordinary breakfast. “For a moment I thought you’d travel without me.”

“Over my dead body,” I said, pouring coffee into my cup of milk. “When I told Annula that Rachel had made a commitment to me, they had a long conversation.”

“Your perseverance and confidence are what make you so special,” she told me. “And you’re not afraid to risk your relationship with your superiors for me. The men I know assume work deserves more attention than their partner’s wellbeing.”

“I wish you’d follow my example,” I said, ironically, “and risk your relationship with your mother for me.”

Anaïs got up, irritated, and, without a word, buried herself in reading *The A.B.C. Murders*.

But I knew she just needed time to think. Like Sancho Panza, who sometimes doubted his master, but always came back to ride at his side in the end.

Bishkek, January 24, 2003

The semester began this week without major setbacks. I announced to my History of Mass Media students that we'd be analyzing the birth of radio in 1920s America, when it was debated whether frequency bands should be freely available across the nation, or regulated by the government.

"A century later," I said, "the Internet raises the very same questions, and it's through history that we can better understand where we stand, and where we're headed."

I then announced the book we'd be studying as our main text: Hugh R. Slotten's *Radio and Television Regulation: Broadcast Technology in the United States, 1920–1960*.

"Another boring book?" said a ruddy teenager with a round face and cheeks like two apples. She wore a tight red knit dress that outlined her wide hips, with a generous V-neck revealing the beginning of her chest. Her thick, rosy arms peeked out from short sleeves trimmed with white lace. On her head, a plastic tiara with fuchsia flowers held back her tangled blonde hair.

"What was the first one?" I asked.

"The one he assigned our classmates in the Communications department," she answered, sucking on a lollipop.

"What's your name?"

"Lada Beshimov," she answered, "like the car brand."

The class burst out laughing together.

"I like your name," I nodded. "Slavic and Kyrgyz. Lada is the Slavic goddess of beauty, isn't she?"

"Wouldn't it be better if you just had us watch

films?" she asked, still nodding.

I promised them we'd watch Robert Redford's *Quiz Show* in a week or two.

On my way out, I ran into Olga, who introduced me to Galina Kalinskaya. She was a beautiful young woman of about twenty-five, with curly black hair falling over her bare shoulders. She wore a white silk blouse with mother-of-pearl buttons, fitted at the waist, and a navy pencil skirt cinched around her narrow hips, ending just above the knee, revealing slender, well-shaped calves. Her large, almond-shaped blue eyes gazed calmly from a high-cheekboned face with thin lips. She wore beige heels that further stylized her slender figure. Olga rested a hand on her shoulder, and Galina smiled, showing off white, even teeth.

"What you've done was necessary," she told me, sparks in her eyes. "For the first time we're discussing, in the Faculty, the corrupt practices at this university."

"Thank you," I replied.

"Do you see that professor having coffee at that table?" she asked me, watching an old man I recognized as Professor Dementiev.

I nodded.

"He's the chief of all the corrupt professors," she grumbled, "but yesterday, at a History Faculty meeting, I learned that he was the very first to declare that, if the rumors you'd spread about a network buying and selling grades at the University were true, he would be the first to demand the corrupt professors' expulsion. Have you ever seen such shamelessness!"

"Who's that girl?" I asked, pointing at Lada, crossing the hallway.

"A spoiled brat," Galina answered. "Is she your student?"

I nodded.

"Be careful; she's Dean Ulrika Devyatkin's daughter. She mocks every professor and won't accept a

grade below a B+."

Bishkek, February 5, 2003

My audiovisual screenwriting course has students from several different degree programs. One of them is named Saltanat, who dresses in white every day, and today she followed me home at noon.

"There's something I have to tell you," she said, beneath Bishkek's skeletal oaks. "I don't know if you're aware, but I had a sister who drowned in December."

"I'm sorry," I said, watching her put on dark glasses with trembling hands.

"She was the sweetest sister," she told me, sobbing. "They say you're a man of principle, that you don't back down before the powerful. That's why I enrolled in your course. Please, don't stop."

"What happened?" I asked, glancing behind me.

She sobbed, and I stepped forward to offer her a comforting embrace, but she pulled back, alarmed.

"If you hug me, we'll draw too much attention. I just want you to listen."

"Alright," I nodded.

"There's a Danish academic determined to make a documentary about a despicable nomadic custom that still exists in this country."

"I believe I know who you mean," I nodded.

"Mr. Franz, as they call him, contacted a student at this university to choose a girl he wanted him to kidnap, rape, and marry."

"God!"

"The one chosen was my sister, Maimouna," Saltanat sighed. "Her beauty was envied throughout the University, and she was engaged to the son of one of the city's most prosperous businessmen. The student Mr. Franz chose was, instead, an unscrupulous farmer. Both of them knew my sister walked alone from the bus

station to the university, and one Monday, at the end of the school semester, they approached and kidnapped her. They filmed the whole thing, though, when we asked Professor Magda for the tapes, she told us she'd destroyed them, out of respect for the victim."

"They used the University's camera?" I asked, stunned.

"Anyone can access that equipment, so long as they rent it from that professor."

"The University president is close friends with Franz," I nodded.

"Daniel Weiler knows nothing about this trade," she replied. "Franz already has companies in the West wanting to buy his documentary, and he doesn't want to share credit with any university."

"So do they still have the tapes?"

"I don't think so," she replied. "And you'll soon understand why."

I nodded.

"What I suspect is that they're going to film another kidnapping this semester," Saltanat burst into tears. "They don't care one bit about the life of a woman in the flower of her youth. They were able to kidnap my sister and drive her outside the city."

"Where to?"

"We'll never know," Saltanat quickened her pace, forcing me to keep up. "Crossing the bridge over the river, my sister managed to break free from those monsters and threw herself into the icy waters."

We had reached the end of the path, at Chuy Avenue.

"May God have her in His glory," I said, over Saltanat's broken sobs.

"They killed her!" she murmured, before turning and walking off, crying, back toward the university.

I spent the rest of the afternoon pondering Saltanat's motives for confessing that crime to me. Did she

want me to expose Franz the way I'd exposed Zernebog? In her eyes, I had become the champion of justice.

I considered that starting a battle against a Westerner so powerful in Kyrgyzstan would only bring me more trouble; my defenses were weak, and, though my adversaries might have considered me defeated, their cruelty was such that they could easily renew their attacks. Only once back in Europe could I truly help her.

Bishkek, February 10, 2003

On Saturday I acted unreasonably. I look at my leg in its cast now and don't dare blame Anaïs for what happened, though I barely speak to her.

Rodrigo organized a ski trip to the mountains with SEP. I hadn't wanted to go at first, but Anaïs promised to teach me, assuring me it wasn't a difficult sport to learn. So we arrived at a clearing where, alongside Whitney, Petra, Omar, Menrik, and other locals, we rented the necessary equipment; from there we were led to a metal cable fitted with wooden bars that, we were told, would carry us up the mountain.

My colleagues and the locals leapt onto the bars with feline agility, balancing their legs perfectly, as though they were rudimentary electric chairs lifting them some ten meters off the ground. Anaïs, already very popular among Rodrigo's group—which included two Japanese women and three Canadians—for being the only one who announced she'd throw herself from the mountaintop, joked around with her new acquaintances, barely registering my terrified expression at the height of those cliffs.

"Are you going to teach me?" I asked, interrupting her laughter.

"Oh!" she said, a smile on her lips. "It's very simple: to brake, you turn your knees and cross your feet inward; to speed up, you let your knees straighten your feet

back out."

"Shall we go to the highest level?" Rodrigo asked her, flashing his movie-star smile.

Anaïs nodded and hopped onto the wooden bar with the help of her fellow traveling adventurer. As she rose, she must have noticed the bewilderment on my face.

"Don't go past the first level," she shouted down to me. "Don't forget you're a beginner."

"Did your little Frenchwoman abandon you?" Whitney asked me, pulling her visor down and hopping onto the wooden bar.

I moved awkwardly and jumped for the cable, so clumsily that I lost my balance and scraped my hand.

"Are you okay?" a young helper asked, offering me his arm.

I nodded and got up, brushing the snow off my suit.

"Let me help you," he said, pointing at the cable still circulating without stopping.

I sighed, determined not to let the circumstances defeat me.

If I must suffer an accident, I prayed to the Virgin Mary, bracing for the worst, *let it be the mildest one*.

Now I wonder why I didn't simply take off that suit and those skis and sit at the café to watch my wife's tricks and acrobatics over the snow. In a way I was certain I'd learn to ski from the instructions she'd given me. Hadn't Anaïs said skiing was an easy sport to learn? Now I reflect on how manipulable we become whenever someone assures us that some undertaking or other is within our reach.

I needed to jump off at the platform marking the first level, but by the time I got ready, I was already three meters above the ground. I needed to have jumped earlier. I sailed over several sharp pines that chilled my blood and approached a second platform.

This time my jump was timed right, and I landed

on the snow without incident. Before me now opened a white, dizzying expanse. I heard Rodrigo's shouts from the mountaintop and saw him, alongside Anaïs, zigzagging down at a breathtaking speed; both of them seemed to be nearly launching themselves into the void, weaving between pines that scraped the clouds.

Whitney then flew past me at top speed, a delighted laugh trailing off down the mountain. Behind her, Omar and Petra came down as well; I barely managed to dodge being hit.

"He's blocking the trail!" Petra shouted, in French.

I pushed off with my poles and moved a few meters, until I crossed my feet and stopped.

"Yes!" I shouted, triumphant.

I gathered momentum and threw myself down the mountain, gaining speed until I reached the first level, and from there, the edge of the path; I turned my feet to swing right, when I felt my legs get caught, and I fell forward, thrown into the void.

As I plummeted, I saw Professor Menrik braking at the edge of the path, alongside other locals. I thought I saw a wide smile on his face.

I fell onto some pine branches that tore at my skin, and from there onto some rocks that scraped my hips as I rolled down onto the snow, bushes, and clouds that darkened and brightened before my eyes.

I was unconscious for an hour or two, until I woke up inside an ambulance, surrounded by the faces of Darixa and Anaïs.

"Forgive me!" Anaïs exclaimed, bursting into tears.

"Is it that bad?" I asked, gripped by dizziness.

"We can send you straight to a hospital in Frankfurt," Darixa told me, with a show of humanity that moved me, "or, if you'd rather stay in Bishkek, we'll take you to a Health Center that opened last week. It has all the modern technology found in the West."

"What happens if you take me to Frankfurt?" I asked. "Can I come back?"

"I'm afraid not," Darixa's expression turned stern. "We'd send you back to your country of residence, and have your belongings sent along afterward."

I thought of Anaïs and our plans to move to London in August. The idea of traveling to Germany for two weeks didn't bother me, but going back to Colombia or France without a job could jeopardize her job offer.

"I'd rather stay."

And I sank into a deep sleep.

I woke up on a stretcher, under fluorescent lights sliding beneath a shining ceiling.

The X-rays revealed that, miraculously, I hadn't fractured anything, only a sprain. I silently thanked the Virgin as they cast my leg in an adjustable material that could be easily removed for my needs.

They took me home in the early hours of the morning.

Though I was given a week's medical leave, I requested crutches, so as not to interrupt my courses.

Bishkek, February 13, 2003

Arriving at the Faculty for my ten o'clock class, Arkadina was waiting for me with an ear-to-ear smile.

"What happened to you?" she asked, arms crossed, her gaze sparkling as it landed on my leg, unwilling to meet my eyes.

"How is Professor Menrik doing?" I asked, once I'd told her what happened.

"You're not seriously suggesting he attacked you?"

"That thought hasn't even crossed my mind," I replied, leaving her office with a hint of indignation.

Coming back from class, I discovered online that Mario Callejas, my editor in Barcelona for *Nuevas Tardes en Manhattan*, had been murdered on a Saturday in November 2002. I had spent three months writing, almost daily, to a

dead man. The last message he ever read was a concise description of the bribery attempt they'd offered me at the American University.

For a moment I wondered whether this was Arkadina's doing, and her cronies'.

Could someone have been making inquiries with a figure at the Kyrgyz embassy? I considered my speculations absurd. Mario had taken the risk of borrowing money from figures in the underworld, in order to hire a literary celebrity to write a foreword for one of his novels. When we launched my book in Barcelona, he told me he was worried about that novel's poor sales, and was pinning his hopes on my work, and that of two other writers.

I prayed for the eternal rest of his soul, and shed a tear for having been unable to help him achieve the success he had promised me.

Bishkek, February 18, 2003

Today our trip to Osh suffered a setback that felt like an insult. Without a second thought, I wrote to William Cork, the Soros Foundation's global director in Budapest:

"Dear Mr. Cork,

Today I received a message from SEP's local office that I'd like to share with you. Here is the full text:

'Hello Marco,

I'm going to buy you a round-trip ticket to Osh; as for Anaïs, unfortunately, SEP cannot cover the expenses of life partners. The most advisable thing is for you to cover Anaïs's ticket.

Please let me know if you two are still together, okay?

Thank you.

Cheers!

Narguiza'

As I've just found out, it was Annula who made

this arbitrary decision. As you may know, my wife is the only permanent life partner of an SEP academic in Bishkek. I am aware that, in previous years, academics have traveled to Osh with their permanent life partners. Why should Anaïs be the exception? In one of the messages Rachel sent us before our departure, she clearly stated that this privilege would extend to my wife as well.

Unless Darixa and Annula change their minds and allow Anaïs to travel with me to Osh, I will be forced to cancel my lecture; a shame, given that it has already been advertised for a week at several universities.

Anaïs cannot stay behind alone. The apartment we live in is the least secure one SEP has rented in Bishkek. About three months ago, at approximately 2 a.m., the wall caught fire inexplicably. Fortunately, I happened to wake up right then to use the bathroom, and was able to put out the fire.

Sincerely,

Marco Noël Saint-André"

I made no mention to Mr. Cork of my suspicion of attempted murder, first because I had no solid proof of it, and second because what mattered to me at that moment was demonstrating the danger my wife would face being left alone in Bishkek.

A few minutes ago, Darixa called to tell me that, thanks to Annula having reallocated part of the leftover budget for other professors' books—who, it seems, have little interest in buying books—SEP had already purchased Anaïs's tickets.

I had the intuition Whitney was behind this unnecessary slight; did they really believe that, bribed with a visit to another city with streets, temples, and avenues, I would sacrifice my duty as Anaïs's husband? Did they know that I had sworn to Michelle, my mother-in-law, that I would care for her daughter as though her life were more precious than my own?

Osh, February 25, 2003

We flew to Osh on one of the old Soviet planes, less spacious than Western ones. Landing on a runway bordered by two meters of snow, we were picked up in a Jeep by Travis Albright, a sturdy blond American of about thirty, and his girlfriend, Eldana, a slender eighteen-year-old Kyrgyz woman. Travis wore an Afghan kurta and yellow pajama, paired with a thick chapan and an Uzbek hat woven in several colors. Only his Adidas Stan Smith sneakers and his Rolex gave away his nationality.

"You'll be staying at the house SEP assigns for our guest lecturers," Travis told us, driving along the road toward Osh. "We've already arranged the car and the driver who'll take you to Osh State University."

I noticed Eldana watching me without taking her eyes off me, as though she found me attractive. Because of my rebelliousness? We reached a cabin nestled on the slope of a small hill overlooking the city; in the entryway I saw wooden cubbyholes with computers set only a few centimeters off the ground, the floor covered in thick camel-hair rugs.

Two young students came out and bowed to Travis, helping him take off his chapan.

"I live with six students," he explained to me, while one of them untied his shoes. "In exchange for lodging, they handle the housekeeping."

"You can tell they're very grateful," Anaïs remarked, taking off her shoes.

We walked into a large room ringed with tall windows overlooking a skeletal, snow-covered forest; the rugs were covered in cushions of various colors and geometric patterns. A third young man invited us to sit at a small table with a teapot and a set of porcelain teacups. Travis and Anaïs settled in while I set the luggage down on the floor.

"I'll show you to your room," Eldana said.

I nodded and was led down a long hallway to a corner room, from which, under an overcast sky, one could make out Osh's jagged skyline. I set the suitcases on a double bed neatly covered in a thick wool comforter. Eldana slid open the main French door and invited me out onto a terrace beautifully decorated with fragments of colored glass and mirrors delicately fastened to its wooden columns.

Wisps of snow fell gently over the city.

"Beautiful," I murmured.

"Isn't it dangerous?"

"Hm?" I asked, watching her shy, maiden-like expression.

"I mean," Eldana narrowed her eyes, "traveling tomorrow into the mountains."

"Believe me, it's no more dangerous than a sunny day in Bishkek."

"We were told," Eldana nodded. "I'm sorry."

"Did they tell you I was paranoid?"

"I've never believed what people tell me," she said, coming closer to my face. "Travis doesn't know, but I've also had to put up with his harassment."

"Sexual harassment?" I asked, taking in her beautiful, longing eyes.

"My family is poor," she nodded. "When I applied to the University, I requested a scholarship, and within a few days I got a call from a university official, who summoned me to a room at the Hyatt Hotel."

"Which official?"

"I can't tell you the name."

"American, or Kyrgyz?" I pressed.

Her lips parted in an involuntary shudder.

"We should go back," Eldana said. "It isn't right for us to stay alone together this long."

Back in the sitting room, Anaïs and Travis were chatting animatedly about our colleagues.

"The only one I can't stand is Parvaneh," Travis said. "She has this Victorian air of superiority that's just offensive."

"All Londoners are like that," I excused her. "They're not bothered by anyone else's vanity either."

"Every time I talk to her, she mentions she published a book on the Iranian middle class," Travis replied. "She knows none of us have done anything like that, and..."

"Marco already published a novel," Anaïs cut in. "Last year we were at its launch, in Barcelona."

"In Spanish?" Travis asked me, with a hint of admiration.

"It was actually the second edition," Anaïs nodded. "The first was published in Bucaramanga."

"That's what I don't understand," Travis said, refilling my teacup. "Several people said your English wasn't the best, and that your knowledge was pretentious. But we've barely known each other two hours, and I already find your English better than the blowhards accusing you."

"You mean Darixa and Arkadina?" I asked.

"I wonder," he nodded, "why they'd speak so badly of you."

"Have you ever heard a communist speak highly of capitalism?" I asked, sipping my tea...

Travis smiled, first timidly, then openly, until he burst out laughing.

"You're very sharp!" he exclaimed, clapping his hands together once. "That's exactly what the locals envy; they can accept an American or a European teaching them how to see the world, but a Colombian?"

"Are you two too tired, or shall we take a walk through the bazaar?" Eldana asked.

"I'm sleepy," Anaïs answered, "and the weather isn't the best."

"We'd rather get an early start," I nodded. "We'll take you two to breakfast at the bazaar."

"I know just the place," Eldana smiled.

"Would you like something to eat?" Travis asked, lighting a cigarette. "Karimov has prepared us a lamb plov, the finest Uzbek style."

I gave Travis a bottle of Jack Daniel's, which we finished off after dinner. When I mentioned I wanted to speak with the locals in Uzbek, Travis thought I was joking. I explained that Kyrgyz and Uzbek were as closely related as Spanish and Portuguese, and that I had studied it diligently over my recent Christmas holiday.

"I'll believe it when I see it," he told me, pouring me another whisky.

Bishkek, February 28, 2003

On Wednesday we woke at four in the morning and had shurpa for breakfast, a hearty lamb and vegetable soup, with freshly baked bread, at the café Travis recommended in the Osh bazaar. Our conversation went on in English and Russian, with the odd phrase I exchanged with the cook in Kyrgyz. It was later, walking through the bazaar's aisles, book in hand, that I struck up my first conversation in Uzbek with an elderly farmer, Mr. Sunnat Khodzhayev, a chapman seller.

Travis, Anaïs, and Eldana watched from a distance, not daring to reveal to the seller that I was another member of SEP's international team. In the end I bought Mr. Khodzhayev a black chapman and a souvenir hat, for the modest sum of ten dollars.

"Man!" Travis told me, on our way to the bus station. "They charge me thirty dollars for what you got today! I wish I had your gift for languages!"

"I only managed a buying-and-selling conversation," I replied. "I have to admit the seller mistook me for an Afghan. The book I bought in Bishkek was, I should add, quite a help."

I helped Anaïs buy several colorful outfits, which

we packed away in our luggage, once back at Travis's house.

Around ten we reached the Osh transport station, where Mr. Walid was waiting for us, outside a restaurant, beside his beat-up 1982 Lada 4x4.

Travis said goodbye and, at Mr. Walid's insistence, we had tea and naan before setting off, since, he warned us, we wouldn't find any restaurants along the way.

"Honestly, we already had a good breakfast," I said.

"Darixa insisted I take you to the best restaurant in the city," he said proudly, in Russian. "They sent me extra money for it."

"How odd," I told Anaïs, once I'd translated the exchange. "First time Darixa has ever shown us any consideration."

"She'll do it as long as your lecture reflects well on SEP's name."

Stepping back out onto the street, the cold had grown sharper beneath a clear, blue sky. Walid cleaned his teeth with a toothpick and opened the doors of his Lada for us. We settled in among freshly washed wool blankets and, holding each other, set off toward the mountains.

The landscape was imposing; Walid climbed along traffic-free, snow-covered roads. We reached a rolling plain and, within seconds, the sky turned ashen. The clouds descended and burnished the road; we now advanced through a dense fog that barely let us see twenty meters ahead. Those clouds brought back memories of the fury of Lisbon's sky before my trip with Ichika, when a gust of wind swept me off my feet.

We're going to have an accident, I sensed, but nothing will happen to us, by God's grace.

With that certainty, I smiled as Walid sped down a road covered in falling wisps of snow. I thought Walid was accelerating with no real need to, but I refrained from

scolding him.

If something must happen, it will happen, I thought, feeling Anaïs's hands pressing against my body.

I reassured her with my gaze, right as Walid lost control of the road. I raised my eyes as I heard the tires screech against the thin layer of ice that had formed over the road. We felt a force pull us to the left, and I watched the car spin uncontrollably; I laughed, remembering the cabin of the Octopus ride at a Bogotá amusement park I'd gone to around 1990; I had been the only customer, and the operator had delighted in throwing me around until I struck my back against the fiberglass seat. My protests had done nothing: I suffered from back pain for nearly six years, until I started practicing yoga.

Anaïs screamed as she tried to reach the door, evidently intending to jump, since the car was skirting an unfathomably deep abyss on every turn. I pulled her toward me firmly, laughing uncontrollably, and shouted that nothing would happen to us. I wondered whether we were still safe because of my premonition, or because of my faith that we wouldn't so much as bruise a finger.

Then the car stopped. We got out and saw it teetering on the edge of the abyss: one of the Lada's tires was hovering in midair.

"I don't know what happened!" Walid exclaimed. "The brakes failed!"

"Luckily," I answered, in Russian, to avoid further explanations, "you're a skilled driver."

Walid laughed, pleased. We pushed the car back onto the road and, opening the hood, Walid discovered the brake fluid had dried out.

"I don't understand!" he told me. "I checked it just eight days ago."

"Do you have a spare canister?"

Walid shook his head.

"We'll flag down cars until we find one."

We stopped several cars until we came across a

truck carrying two spare canisters. I paid through the nose for one, and we resumed our journey until we arrived, around one-thirty in the afternoon, without further incident, at a Rural School in Osh, where we were greeted by Omar.

"How was the trip?" he asked me, once I'd stepped out, opening Anaïs's door.

"Like a roller coaster," I answered, before my wife's hilarious expression. "Do you have a phone? I need to make a call to Bishkek."

"I'm afraid we don't have any phones here," he told me. "But at four we've scheduled your lecture on Edgar Allan Poe at the Turkish State School. As you'll see, it has all the comforts of the West. You'll be able to call from there."

"I need to use the bathroom," Anaïs cut in.

"Oh!" Omar let out a groan. "Didn't Travis warn you?"

"Warn us of what?" I asked.

"In this part of the world," Omar sighed, "the sanitation facilities are still those of the age of the great Tamerlane."

"What does that mean?" Anaïs asked me.

"Qui n'ont que des latrines," I answered, in French, so as not to further embarrass Omar.

"I have no problem going there," she replied.

Omar led us to the office of the School's principal, Professor Naim Babayev, who received us with a plov ceremoniously served by two beautiful teenage girls, on his own desk.

"They are my daughters," he said. "Please accept this token of Southern hospitality."

"Mrs. Saint-André needs to use the restroom."

"Oh!" Babayev blushed. "I'll give you the keys to the faculty and staff restroom. It's better kept."

He handed me a key and led us through several

hallways to an iron door, which, he told me, I could lock for greater privacy. I followed his instructions, and we walked into a fetid cubicle with tall iron-barred windows flung wide open, and a tin roof, holding twelve porcelain toilets, separated by thin wooden panels repainted with lime. A cloud of flies flew in and out through the toilet holes.

"I'm going to be sick!" Anaïs exclaimed, retreating to the iron door.

"What can we do?" I asked, locking the faculty bathroom behind us.

"I'd rather pee on a tree."

"Can you wait until four?" I asked. "There's a Turkish school, they say, with better facilities."

We had lunch then, under Professor Babayev's obsequious gaze.

"Won't you eat with us?" I asked, noticing he was only served tea.

"Forgive our manners," he excused himself. "We only eat once we've fully tended to our guests."

At 2 p.m. we gave simultaneous lectures; Anaïs on Marketing and Advertising, and I on literature and politics, titled "Poe, the Mask of the Red Death, and Its Bearing on Western Civilization." My young students smiled condescendingly at the start of my presentation, but couldn't hide their expressions of astonishment and interest once I presented my critique of Western assumptions of security and immortality:

Wealth, luxury, and excess consecrate a small region of the world above all others. The media amplify the superabundance of those regions, turning them into history's central stages. An artificial sense of inclusion and exclusion grows both inside and outside modern societies. "How do I get to Broadway?... I want to go where everything's happening," one character declares in *Manhattan Transfer*, upon disembarking in the United States. Broadway, however, is described by Dos Passos as no

more than any crowded street, over which people walk in every direction. Neocolonial ideology is only ever shaken by catastrophes and natural disasters.

Wrapping up my lecture, I concluded that even if they closed their borders and built walls, plagues would come from which the West would not be exempt, simply because the world cannot be divided according to human whim.

"Eternal life is not of this world," I stated, plainly.

The students rose from their seats and burst into applause that lasted several minutes, drawing the attention of local teachers holding class nearby.

"Why such enthusiasm?" I asked Omar.

"Because you haven't belittled them," he answered, with a satisfied smile. "The other professors make them feel as though their lives, outside the USA or Europe, were the unhappiest in the world."

At four, hurrying our driver and calming Anaïs, who was writhing in her seat as though giving birth, we arrived at the Turkish school, where we immediately took her to a bathroom with a proper water tank.

"I was afraid you'd join the list of martyrs to hygiene Kundera makes such fun of," I told her upon her return, dialing SEP's main office.

"Hello?" Darixa asked, on the other end of the line.

"Hello, Darixa!" I exclaimed, my voice defiant. "I just wanted to let you know that we traveled from Osh to the rural school without any trouble, and gave the lecture to a very grateful audience... Hello?"

I heard some knocks and a few words in Kyrgyz I couldn't understand.

"Hello?" Mirbek's voice asked this time. "Marco? It's Mirbek."

"I was talking with Darixa," I stammered.

"She's in a meeting," Mirbek answered. "Is there anything we can help you with?"

"You already have, Mirbek," I answered. "Take care."

I hung up without waiting for his response.

I concluded that only a fool would remain in that den of hyenas.

We gave a brief talk to the Turkish students about American and English universities, and by five we were back in Osh, where we picked up our luggage. We said goodbye to Travis and Eldana with hugs and promises to see each other again, and boarded the ten o'clock flight bound for Bishkek.

Bishkek, March 6, 2003

I dreamed I was naked from the waist down, walking down a dark hallway surrounded by Doberman dogs. There was a light at the end of the corridor, which, I sensed, I needed to reach in order to be safe. Yet with every step I could feel the dogs' jaws closing in on my testicles, no doubt a reminder of Arkadina's burning stare at my cast leg, or of my readings of American history, in which colonists trained their mastiffs to castrate the half-naked native men of Philadelphia.

In the dogs' eyes I recognized the same furious stares of Magda, Darixa, Professor Dementiev, Dr. Utkin, Zernebog, Annula, and Whitney.

The pages of a calendar then fell away, until a gloved hand pointed to May 9th. I turned my gaze and faced the figure of Death, the archetypal character from Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*.

I woke in the middle of the night, understanding they had plotted my murder in Osh, not caring whether it also cost the life of the driver they'd hired for the job—in their original plan—and then, seeing my refusal, that Anaïs would die along with me and the driver. While we were having lunch, the hired killer—paid less than a hundred dollars—had emptied the brake fluid reservoir, but it was, precisely, the icy road conditions that made the car lose its

balance on its axle at that final lost drop, spinning in a spiral, and, in that providential motion, coming to a stop right at the edge of the abyss.

"Tell your bosses we'll be traveling to London the first week of May," I told Anaïs, waking her up, refraining from recounting to her a plot so lucid, and yet so impossible to believe.

"What are you talking about?" she asked me, stunned.

"They're conspiring against us again," I told her. "We have to leave before the last Film Club screening."

24. London

Jesuitism, hypocrisy, bad faith, the art of deceit and lying, which are called vices in society, are qualities in politics, and the best diplomat, the best statesman, is he who best knows how to hide them and put them to use.

Simón Bolívar

Bishkek, March 8, 2003

Anaïs spoke with her employers yesterday, and they agreed to have us at the London airport on May 4th. I was writing my letter of resignation to SEP when I received a message from Annula telling me that, given the success of my lectures in Osh, SEP wanted to hire me as a professor for another Central Asian university, likely in Samarkand. She noted, however, that the contract depended on a second evaluation report, from a professor they would assign in the coming days.

"And the results of my first evaluation?" I asked.

"Satisfactory," Annula answered, "but not excellent. That's why we need your cooperation once more."

I therefore postponed my resignation, hoping they'd offer me a contract that would let me travel between London and Samarkand next semester.

"I don't agree with this," Anaïs told me as soon as I told her, over lunch at the University cafeteria. "You know we've never accepted jobs that would separate us."

"No university in London is going to hire me," I replied, with a hint of helplessness. "What good does it do me to live there without a proper job?"

"You'll find something," she answered. "Besides, Fátima wrote to me yesterday. She says she could put you up in Orlando while you find work in the USA."

"Without papers?" I replied.

“And wouldn’t a job in the USA also mean a separation?”

“It’s not the same thing,” Anaïs huffed. “You’d be with your sister!”

“I’d rather work as a doorman in London,” I sighed.

“That sounds like a brilliant idea,” she nodded, before taking a sip of her wine.

I remembered that her stepsisters were married to gardeners and bricklayers earning good salaries.

That afternoon I received a message from Dorian, urging me to rent the University’s video equipment to record the international student debate taking place in April. I told him I didn’t think it was possible, since the equipment was controlled by a professor who made no secret of her hostility toward me.

My Irish colleague was very excited about the documentary; shortly after, I got a message from Annula, copying Dorian, explaining that I could request the relevant equipment directly from my dean or from the University president. I answered that I didn’t want to trigger a second confrontation at the university, since I suspected the equipment was being rented out to third parties without the American authorities’ knowledge.

Before going to bed, I realized I’d made a careless move: if Annula and Darixa were as close as I believed, by tomorrow I’d have a note from Darixa threatening me for slandering the locals.

Bishkek, March 10, 2003

Just as I expected, Darixa circulated my email to the university’s and SEP’s leadership in Budapest, which prompted Arkadina to send me an email demanding substantial proof of corruption in Professor Magda’s use of the equipment.

“Otherwise,” she added, “I demand an apology

from Professor Saint-André, in my presence.”

I refrained from answering, and, just as I expected, Arkadina didn’t press the matter further, given her closeness with Darixa. The mistake, after all, had been SEP’s.

Derogan, who had come back to visit Petra, called me the next day to tell me, laughing, that Darixa had been reprimanded from Budapest for circulating confidential emails to third parties.

I then received a formal email from Arkadina, informing me that the Faculty would gladly lend me a portable VHS camera. I answered that, for the project we had in mind, we needed the digital Canon camera. I immediately wrote to Annula and Dorian, explaining that, given the prevailing racism and nationalism in my department, I doubted Arkadina and Magda would ever lend me the equipment to make the documentary.

“Honestly,” I told Anaïs over lunch, “I don’t even want to make that documentary anymore. Why should I highlight young people pretending to love knowledge, when they’re really only after enriching themselves with a bureaucratic post like the one Arkadina or Darixa have secured? As in Colombia, Mexico, India, and so many countries still living in the past, young people don’t learn from the books great thinkers have left them, but from the hypocrisy and cunning of their most influential teachers.”

Annula then proposed, Dorian wrote to me, that Petra or Venkatesh request the equipment instead, to which I replied:

“Dear Dorian,

I fully agree with you and with Annula. If a local SEP colleague can secure the digital camera for us, let’s move forward with the project.

But I’m afraid the Communications Department’s professors will only offer the VHS camera to someone with little knowledge of film, on the excuse that the Canon

camera requires a specialized professor. That maneuver would paralyze the project: the VHS camera requires cumbersome lighting equipment and produces a noisy image texture that isn't professional. VHS documentaries are dismissed today as 1980s wedding videos.

Marco”

Arkadina's reply came quickly.

“Dear Professor Saint-André,

After reviewing your request to borrow the Faculty's digital video equipment, the administrative committee has decided that you do not qualify as a user of said equipment. We have therefore designated Professor Magda as inspector to ensure its proper use. We require that you cover your own transportation, lodging, and per diem expenses during the filming of your documentary.

We await your response within the next twenty-four hours.

Arkadina Morozov”

I answered immediately, copying every professor and administrator at SEP and the University, in Bishkek, Budapest, and New York:

“Dear colleagues,

It is uncomfortable to learn, as a member of the Journalism Program and an MFA in Film from Temple University, that, according to my former Soviet colleagues, I do not ‘qualify’ as a ‘user’ of the digital camera. In any case, I had already anticipated such treatment.

Before responding to such a demanding committee, I would appreciate it if the Faculty's professors could clarify whether this inspector would travel merely to verify that I am using the camera correctly, or whether she also intends to impose a technical opinion—for instance,

telling us when and under what circumstances the camera should be operated.

Marco Noël Saint-André Ferreira”

Bishkek, March 13, 2003

Today I returned my students' first essay, graded and annotated. They had been asked to predict their future twenty years from now. I wept with emotion reading the reflections of Gulzat, a shy Kyrgyz teenager who, over the course of my History of Mass Media class, had become far more articulate:

“Now that I understand I hold the same rights and abilities as any human being, whether they live in Beijing or Los Angeles, and now that I recognize myself as a young citizen at the dawn of the globalized era, I hope to learn languages, travel the world, write essays, have romances with young men from other nations, adventures with brave friends, fight lies, and expose corruption, leaving behind a mark of hope in a world I inherited already rotten, one so many false teachers taught me—through cunning, hypocrisy, and lies—could never be improved.”

I met with Lada at the end of class, to deal with a possible case of plagiarism.

“Your essay on Andrei Sakharov is very interesting,” I said, “but it has nothing to do with the assigned topic.”

“I specified I'd see myself in twenty years, reflecting on Sakharov,” she replied, defiantly.

“A way of declaring your interest in the essay genre,” I nodded, “or, should I say, in the informational genre?”

“What are you implying?”

“There's no thesis in your essay,” I said, “only a compilation of encyclopedic facts written in impeccable English. I just want you to be honest with me: is this article a translation of a piece published in some Russian magazine or newspaper?”

Lada looked at me first with fear, then with dread, until she broke down in uncontrollable tears. I pulled a small packet of tissues from my jacket's inner pocket and offered them to her. I understood I had caught her at her own trick. How many more essays had she submitted this way over the course of her academic career? My intention, however, wasn't to expose her to a system that pretended to be strict but was actually permissive; it was to correct her behavior for the sake of her professional life.

The lesson had ended.

"Forget what I asked you," I said. "Your grade is B+. I hope your next assignment will show me something more original."

Lada wiped away her tears, composed herself, and, shooting me a look of hatred and disdain, gathered her things, stood up, and left.

Bishkek, March 28, 2003

Despite SEP's promises, my second class has still not been evaluated. Yesterday I learned, from Parvaneh, that every one of my colleagues, except me, had already received letters from Annula inviting them to continue their work for another year. I went to SEP and spoke with Darixa, who told me they hadn't managed to hire a professor willing to evaluate my classes.

Walking back to my apartment, a soft rain fell over the city. Rounding the abandoned courtyard separating my building from SEP's offices, I saw, tucked beneath the doorway of a ruined building, a small woman wrapped in a blue fur coat.

"Marco," a voice whispered, and I recognized Narguiza.

I glanced around and, seeing no one nearby, walked over to her. She immediately took my arm and led me up to a small room on the rooftop of that abandoned building, on the tenth floor.

"If they find out we've been together, I'll lose my job," she told me, out of breath. "There's something you need to know."

"I'm all ears," I nodded.

"You've become popular among your students in Anglo-American Studies," she explained, "and no professor wants to anger Annula, Arkadina, Darixa, or Rector Gulmat with an evaluation that even slightly favors you."

"I understand," I murmured.

"I'd advise you to leave this city before it's too late."

Her eyes grew wet. She gently placed her fingers on her own lips, then on mine, signaling that she cared for me, and that, if I cared for her too, I should stay silent and act with caution until my departure.

She slipped away, walking down the stairs.

Her words, which I will always be grateful for, told me I had nothing left to hope for from SEP or Central Asia. What were they after, keeping me under the belief that my contract would be renewed, when all signs pointed to the opposite? To humiliate me? To destroy me?

I stayed on that rooftop for nearly half an hour, taking in the city that was banishing me, before heading home at nightfall.

Even so, just to gauge the extent of their scheming, I wrote once more to William Cork, the Soros Foundation's global director, complaining of Annula and Darixa's discrimination, and denouncing Arthur Holmes's bias, given his kinship with Arkadina.

William answered by calling me paranoid, and saying it was the first time anyone had questioned the entire organization, not only in Bishkek, but also in Budapest.

He added, confirming my suspicions, that the reason my contract wasn't being renewed was that Arkadina would be receiving, the following year, a cohort of three graduates in Communications from the American

University of Kyrgyzstan.

All three, he explained, had completed a one-semester intensive course to have their undergraduate degrees recognized in the USA, through the University of Iowa. Arkadina's responsibility, therefore, was to offer them jobs at the University as USA-trained international faculty.

I refrained from telling him I doubted the professionalism of those graduates, no doubt relatives or close friends of Arkadina.

Instead, I wrote that I felt discriminated against and persecuted, since my life had been in danger on several occasions, without SEP even deigning to move us to an apartment with a safer entrance, without broken glass, and without faulty electrical circuits:

"...whether by mere coincidence, threatening phone calls, two traffic accidents, a wall catching fire, and a collision on a ski slope at the edge of a precipice are facts that cannot be ignored by the leadership of an organization that prides itself on protecting its academics from post-Soviet violence.

SEP has not even bothered, at this point, to hand me a letter formally declaring the end of my contract; instead, they keep promising to evaluate me. Today a trustworthy source informed me that Annula and Darixa are planning to draft a humiliating justification for my dismissal. An evaluation by a professor who unconditionally shares Arkadina's prejudices and bias?

I'm afraid it's time to walk away from this sinister game.

I hereby present my irrevocable resignation from SEP, through this message. Both my wife and I are expected in London by early May.

I will therefore not be attending the retreats SEP organizes at various hotels across Central Asia during May and June. I will move up my academic activities with my

students, and will submit final grades to my Faculty by Monday, May 5th.

Wishing you a brighter future as director of the Soros Foundation.

Marco Saint-André"

Bishkek, March 29, 2003

Yesterday I met with Petra to discuss the second phase of the Film Club. At her suggestion, she'd take charge of introducing every film except the last one.

"Bergman isn't one of my favorites," she said, mockingly.

"I'm afraid I won't be able to introduce *The Seventh Seal*," I replied. "Anaïs has been offered a position in London."

Petra's face went pale, before quickly taking on that greenish tone that reveals envy in fair-skinned people.

"And," she stammered, "I suppose she's invited you to go with her."

"We're traveling on May 4th," I nodded, ignoring her absurd remark.

I noticed that, as in an Alexandre Dumas novel, Petra bit her lip, searching for a plausible explanation.

"I see," she stammered. "No problem. I'll invite Venkatesh to introduce the film."

Back home, I told Anaïs about Petra's reaction.

"From the very start, Petra treated me like her idiot little sister," she sighed, hurt.

"She assumed," I nodded, "like every scarcely well-read academic, that only those who flatter power can ever live in London."

"It's healthy for her to collide with reality," Anaïs said, with a hopeful look. "What we're living through is a miracle, Marco. God is rewarding you for your honesty."

"I know," I smiled.

We embraced beneath the shelter of the night.

Bishkek, April 4, 2003

Two days ago, Annula suggested I request the equipment directly from the University president, adding that SEP had no money to cover an “inspector’s” travel expenses to the debate.

I procrastinated on that errand until yesterday, when the president’s secretary informed me that the equipment was already booked for the rest of the semester.

In a week, then, we’ll travel, without any video equipment, to a hotel in the mountains overlooking Lake Issyk-Kul.

Bishkek, April 15, 2003

We arrived at the university Saturday at seven in the morning. The big news was meeting Jean Paul, Petra’s blond, sturdy brother, who complained to us in French, relieved to escape a dozen young female students chasing after him.

“I’ve told them I don’t want any relationship with any girl in this city!” he said, ignoring several of them shouting his name behind him. “They see me as their passport to Europe!”

“Be careful,” Parvaneh said, with her usual irony, “if you reject them all, they’ll say you’re gay.”

Anaïs and I settled into a back seat on the bus that would take us to the hotel hosting the international debates. The buzz of young people from various countries was cheerful and full of promise. Several minutes passed, and the bus still hadn’t started its engine.

“We’re waiting for Franz and Helen to arrive,” Darixa explained.

I looked out the window at the University’s main entrance.

Dr. Utkin, dressed in a green wool suit, was watching us, seated on a bench, filling his tobacco pipe.

“I’ll go to the restroom,” I told Anaïs. “Five

minutes.”

The moment I stood up, my seat was taken by Miron, a slender blond young man who told us he was interested in pursuing a master’s degree in France.

Coming back from the restroom, the bus had vanished. I went back to the University’s front entrance, where Dr. Utkin was taking a leisurely drag on his pipe, an unhurriedness I found irritating.

“Do you know anything about the bus that was here a few minutes ago?”

“Bus?” he replied. “I’ve only seen cars coming and going.”

“I’m not in the mood for jokes,” I replied.

“I was at the Film Club last night,” he answered, exhaling his smoke. “I liked Petra’s introduction to Bertolt Brecht’s play about Galileo Galilei.”

“A man who had to fight against the foolishness of his own colleagues.”

“Do you really believe you’re some martyr of the academy?” Dr. Utkin watched me, not hiding his displeasure. “What exactly have you discovered that lets you compare yourself to Galileo?”

“Perhaps the ability to be courteous with those I dislike,” I replied.

“I’ve been assigned as the evaluator of your most recent course,” Dr. Utkin snapped. “Could I evaluate you during the last week of April?”

“I don’t think that’s necessary anymore,” I told him. “I’ve resigned from SEP.”

Dr. Utkin looked at me, astonished.

“Are you going back to Colombia?”

“I’m traveling to London.”

Dr. Utkin remained motionless for several seconds, absorbing my words. Then his lips slowly spread, until he burst into a loud, resounding laugh.

“Do you think you’re going to get away with this?” he asked me, defiantly.

I turned and headed toward my apartment, my fists clenched with fury. Unlocking the door, the phone was ringing insistently.

"Hello?" I answered.

"I'm sorry I forgot you," Anaïs said, her voice anguished. "The bus started moving, and the students wouldn't stop asking me questions. I asked about you, and someone shouted you were in a seat up front. I assumed you were talking with Annula. The moment I noticed you weren't with us, I asked them to turn back, but Darixa said it was already too late, we couldn't afford another delay on the return trip. So I asked them to stop at this gas station instead."

I sighed silently, not daring to unleash my anger.

"I'm calling you from a payphone," Anaïs insisted. "Are you okay?"

"Never!" I shouted, bursting into an indignant groan. "Understand me! I would never, ever, be capable of abandoning you anywhere!"

And, seized by fury, I slammed the receiver down so hard I knocked the phone to the floor. Picking it up, I noticed I'd cracked off a piece of its thin plastic casing. I realized I was acting like a fool. The phone rang again.

"Forgive me," I said. "I shouldn't have shouted at you."

"That's exactly what they want," Anaïs answered, conciliatory. "I've already sent a taxi to pick you up."

Bishkek, April 27, 2003

We tackled the thorny topic of abortion in a confrontation that, with everyone present complicit, ended up unfolding not between the twenty-four students from various nations, but between Annula and me. Our opposing views on ethics and politics clashed before delegates from Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan.

"I regret not having filmed the exchange between professors and students," Dorian told me at the end of the debate.

Saturday afternoon we introduced ourselves and were assigned the groups of students we'd be coaching in the art of rhetoric. I was paired with Dorian, given a group of twelve students, two from each nation. I was pleased to find the Kyrgyz representatives were Saltanat and Hun-Sue.

We taught concepts, exchanged impressions, and dealt with the skepticism of Miron and Olenka, two young people from Dushanbe, capital of Tajikistan. Dressed in outdated clothing, both of them kept quoting the Soviet encyclopedia to challenge me whenever Dorian or I raised a contemporary concept; so, when I discussed the concept of race, they insisted there were hierarchies among human beings.

"What have Latin Americans contributed to human progress?" they asked, no doubt quoting some visiting professor.

"They cured famine in Europe," I answered, citing the historian Germán Arciniegas, "in Asia and in Africa."

"How so?"

"They exported the potato to Europe and Asia," I answered, "and cassava to Africa; without those tubers, humanity would never have expanded, would never have had a Renaissance, or a modernity."

"What an invention!" they replied. "Is the potato a synthetic fruit?"

"That theory would need investigating," I nodded, "but what's certain is that the Chibcha had perfected its cultivation, producing the very varieties that today feed nearly every country in the world."

My students' first debate was against Petra and Whitney's group, on the topic of legalizing prostitution. I helped them frame their rebuttal through two questions: do you want your daughters and sisters to find their way of

life through the foreigners who come to these lands looking for fresh flesh? And doesn't such legalization stagnate the economy, as happened in Cuba, sacrificing ingenuity and hard work for revelry, drugs, and easy money?

When Hun-Sue voiced the first question, her face full of indignation, the audience burst into applause. We had won the preliminary round.

That night, two large bonfires were organized on a plain beside the mountain facing Lake Issyk-Kul; one for the students, another for the professors and administrators.

Jean Paul stood out among the students, hugging two girls at once, one Russian and one Kyrgyz, while entertaining six others with French jokes the Russian girl translated.

We sat with Darixa, Annula, Arkadina, Whitney, Gretchen, Venkatesh, Menrik, Dorian, Parvaneh, Narguiza, Jeff, Rachel, Travis, Eldana, Omar, Rick, Flor, Petra, Franz, and Helen. It would be, we knew, one of the last leisurely moments we'd share with our colleagues and students, and both Anaïs and I savored every conversation with that sense of eternity only nomads truly understand.

"How's your reading of Proust going?" Gretchen asked me.

"I'm on the third novel."

"Have you reached the scene where Proust bites into a madeleine and is transported back to his past?"

"By the end of the first volume," I nodded.

"Of tonight," she asked, with a hint of sadness, "what taste will you take away as a memory?"

I thought for a moment.

"Honestly, there's something that moves me even more than a taste or a smell," I answered, "and that's a line of verse, a word, a speech. From tonight, believe it or not, I'll take away your very question about Proust."

"Oh!" said the German maiden, hand over her heart.

"Of all my colleagues," I added, "you're the only one who's ever shared my passion for literature with me."

"Thank you for the compliment," Parvaneh replied.

Gretchen embraced me, moved.

"Thank you!" she told me, smiling.

"I see your fall didn't leave you any lasting harm," Menrik said behind me, offering me his hand.

I accepted his greeting, unable to refuse him.

"I hope you don't hold what happened against me," he added. "You were right at the edge of the trail; if I smiled, it was because I was happy to see you'd made it out safely."

His explanation, one I'd never asked for, unsettled me.

"All's well that ends well," I murmured, quoting Shakespeare.

"Marco should teach a course on Elizabethan theater," Whitney remarked, with exaggerated enthusiasm.

"Actually," I answered, "I taught a course on *Timon of Athens* at Salford University."

"Is it true this was your first time skiing?" Travis asked, offering me a shot of vodka.

"And it'll be my last," I nodded. "I don't understand the thrill of extreme sports. Everyday life in this city already offers plenty of danger."

"Skiing isn't an extreme sport," Darixa snapped.

"That depends on the jump involved," Dorian replied.

"It was my fault," Anaïs cut in. "I shouldn't have left him alone."

"Can't Marco take care of himself?" Franz remarked, ironically.

"It's difficult when someone unwittingly pushes you off a cliff," I answered, "or when a production crew

throws you into a river.”

Menrik, Omar, and Rick burst out laughing. Franz’s face turned red as he held back his anger.

“South Americans have a strange sense of humor,” Flor said, winking at me.

We were interrupted by the sudden arrival of Tom Robinson, who, in his hippie attire and disheveled hair, stepped down from a 4x4 Jeep to announce he would be judging the final debate the next morning.

“I can’t believe Venkatesh, Travis, Petra, and Franz’s teams all got knocked out of the competition!” he exclaimed, sitting down beside us.

“Now the final is between Annula and Franz’s students, and Dorian and Marco’s,” Gretchen said, with a lethargic look. “I don’t understand why the anthropologists were excluded from this contest.”

“Sexism,” Parvaneh muttered.

“It’ll be a battle between Christianity and progressivism,” Petra cut in, eyes glassy, taking Derogan’s hands.

Dorian smiled, unwilling to refute the presumed Catholic zeal of the Irish.

“How’s your brother doing?” I asked Petra, not daring to correct her.

“He’s had to move up his trip, for the sake of his mental health,” she answered. “We’ve seen how they treat him here, like a rock idol.”

“It’s embarrassing watching them chase after him,” Annula cut in.

“I hope he doesn’t have to cross a war zone on his way back to France,” I remarked, alluding to Bush and Blair’s war against Saddam Hussein.

“We’ve already arranged for him to travel via Moscow,” Darixa replied, from the other side of the bonfire.

“That way they can avoid the first relative of a

Soros Foundation program member dying,” Anaïs said, alluding to the attempts on our own lives. “Congratulations!”

I exchanged a knowing look with Anaïs. We understood perfectly well the double standard Annula and Darixa applied: willing to pay fines for changing a relative’s flight bookings, yet up in arms over one simple round-trip ticket from Bishkek to Osh.

“I wanted to ask you two,” Tom said, “what do you think the outcome of this war will be?”

There was a brief silence, barely interrupted by the crackle of burning wood.

“The problem isn’t overthrowing Saddam Hussein,” I answered, “but meeting the local population’s needs.”

“It’s a war that could take years,” Petra said.

“Our students are planning a protest through the streets of Bishkek,” Tom replied. “I’m worried the local population will turn against foreigners.”

“If only they knew the only ones who could ever actually end this war,” I said, “are, precisely, the Americans themselves.”

Tom studied me, stroking his chin with one hand.

“I agree,” Flor said. “According to recent polls, most Americans don’t believe Saddam has weapons of mass destruction.”

“Bush and Blair’s arbitrary decisions,” I went on, “will pave the way for the election of a Democratic president committed to bringing American troops back home.”

Arkadina then proposed we head into the hotel lobby, where we could play the card game of murderer and detective. We agreed, and, for about three hours, cards in hand, we forgot who we were.

Amid laughter and shared secrets, Anaïs and I forgave, like children, all those who had put us through so many bitter moments in Kyrgyzstan.

The next morning, the debate opened with a fierce contest between the students. Annula and Franz's side, led by Oleg and Leo, argued that a woman held full authority over her body and over the lives she conceived, while our students demonstrated, from scientific evidence, that a human being was already formed by three months of gestation. Oleg then whispered a few points to Franz and Annula before asking to speak.

"What must be debated here isn't whether the fetus feels or thinks," he said, "but its degree of dependence on its mother. Isn't the mother's life constantly at risk, right up until the baby is born? And isn't it, therefore, the mother's privilege to end that risk whenever she deems it necessary for her physical or mental health? Thank you."

Following our opposing tutors' example, Dorian and I approached our own group and reminded them of several arguments.

"Doesn't a baby need its parents' care?" Saltanat asked the audience. "How many parents abandon their babies on the grounds that they threaten their physical or mental health? Every baby, dear audience, needs its parents, and it is the father and mother who risk their own lives for their babies, as we see not only in human society, but especially among animals."

General applause, from which both Annula and Franz abstained, interrupted her presentation.

"If we accept the arguments of those defending here a power of life or death over babies," she went on, "after three months of gestation, we would then also have to accept the Roman law granting parents power of life or death over their children until they reached adulthood. Christianity abolished that inhumane law, just as the world's most civilized countries have abolished the laws permitting the killing of babies in their mothers' wombs."

The word "killing" set off a murmur through the crowd.

"What's the name of that law?" Whitney asked. "In Latin, if you'd be so kind."

Saltanat looked at us, nervously.

"Patria potestas," Miron cut in, "which literally translates to 'the Father's Power.'"

"That boy has a photographic memory," Dorian whispered to me.

There was more applause, during which I saw Annula and Franz conferring with Oleg and Leo.

"Excellent arguments!" Annula then exclaimed, clapping three times. "Unfortunately, they're religious ones, as are all the arguments inspiring our opponents, students educated in the Jesuit school of an Irishman and a Colombian."

"Ad hominem argument!" I protested to the judges' panel, made up of Tom, Travis, and Jeff. "They're not debating the arguments, but the tutors' nationality."

"Sustained!" Travis said, after deliberating with his colleagues for a few seconds.

"A fetus is a fetus until it's born!" Annula exclaimed, rising from her seat. "Calling a being that has never seen the light of day a human being is like calling Dracula a living creature."

Her side's students burst into laughter.

"But before we continue," Annula added, "I'd like to ask you: by what standard, and with what authority, do you stop calling us Defenders of Free Choice, and instead vilely brand us Defenders of Murder? Is it fair for you to condemn a woman for ridding herself of an unwanted being, whether by her nation's moral standards, or because she considers it a serious obstacle to her career? Can you prohibit a woman, even at the risk of her own life, from deciding not to give birth to a being that no one, listen carefully, no one but her, more than anyone else, can create or eliminate at will? Do you know that most Muslim theologians authorize women to rid themselves of a child conceived through rape, or when the mother's life is at

risk? Doesn't the Christian creed say one may not judge anyone? Would you go to the battlefield for a cause you don't believe in, when you could avoid it, the same way a mother would carry an unwanted child to term when she could avoid it through abortion?"

Dorian looked at me, eyes wide with alarm. Breaking the debate's protocol, our supervisor was challenging us in public. I understood immediately that, if I confronted her, Dorian could find himself in trouble, whereas I had nothing left to lose.

"I confess I deeply respect your questions," I stood up, accepting the challenge. "After all, they're statements posed as questions, expressing passionate, particular points of view. If I were to answer them, I'd be accepting a set of rules and standards already predetermined by you. You reference Muslim theology, while acknowledging there's no unanimous consensus on the matter.

"Should I mention that the Dalai Lama was in Bogotá about a month ago, and that, according to what we read in the papers, his main speech was a calm, dispassionate defense of a fetus's right to live? Nor do I wish to debate your particular prejudices and beliefs. I can only express my own views on your questions.

"Debates today are not conducted through maieutics, that condescending Socratic method of questions and answers designed to ambush someone through contextual definitions, but through arguments capable of persuading us emotionally and intellectually. You, dear Annula, presume that women who have abortions after twelve weeks of pregnancy should not be judged. I agree. But if we're consistent with that ethical stance, we should also pardon soldiers of every kind, serial killers, and pedophiles. Why would we apply the Christian precept of 'do not judge' to only one group? No: societies are not ready to legalize anarchy.

"I feel equally indignant at an abortion as I do at a

woman's imprisonment for having one. My ethics is not governed by your binary of Good against Evil. As for your ad hominem arguments: I am more prepared to die than to kill my enemy. In the sixties, some Colombian peasants murdered fifty indigenous people because they believed they were animals. The judge acquitted them. In the same way, many defenders of 'Free Choice' argue that fetuses aren't human beings, but unconscious creatures. Do we call a man who follows orders a murderer? Or someone raised watching violent television? Or a Central Asian professor who suffered post-Soviet famine?

"We cannot judge actions whose context we don't fully know. That's why I condemn punitive laws, even as societies insist on protecting the defenseless. Tolerance and forgiveness are not the same as acquiescence. The real debate is whether the fetus is human, a discussion dating back to the sixteenth century, when the conquistadors debated whether the natives even were."

"On the label 'Defenders of Free Choice': do they defend both choices, or only one? Have they ever once boasted of having saved a fetus? No. They boast of facilitated abortions, or funded clinics. While science detects consciousness by the ninth week, some countries permit abortions up to twenty-two.

"I distrust science, which changes its narrative. That's why I trust my ethical conscience instead. As long as I live, I will believe in life. Every being clings to it. That is why the 'Defenders of Murder' do not defend the rights of fetuses, but those of women, whose lives are hard. Do we kill to soften that hardship? I believe, with Averroes, that being is better than not being, and living better than not living. If the problem is the desperate mother, why don't we fight instead for the rights of infanticides? Abortion divides humanity. I do not intend to change anyone's beliefs, but my ethics will not let me condone a criminal act."

The audience burst into applause. Leo stood and

applauded, before Franz and Annula's stunned faces. His classmates followed suit.

"Absurd!" Annula shouted, walking to the center of the auditorium. "This is absurd! By what right does a man come here to tell me what I must do with my body? Sartre wrote that there are situations in which human beings must choose between two tragedies, and, in such circumstances, no one can judge us for what we do! No one! Least of all a reactionary, macho Christian incapable of even understanding what I have lived through!"

Annula's face was drenched in sweat; she was invoking the personal trauma she had already revealed to us upon our arrival. A tense silence fell over every face in the room.

But this time her defense was not as effective; the students saw that this solitary, stocky woman, with her cucumber-shaped nose and acne-scarred face, had once fallen in love, and had once sacrificed the fruit of that romance for her professional career, in some dark, clandestine hospital in India.

"Sartre was speaking of French people forced to choose between death or obedience to Hitler's regime," I nodded, conciliatory. "What matters is that you are already calling abortion a tragedy."

"That's exactly why," Hun-Sue exclaimed, "every nation should allow a woman to carry her pregnancy to term, and, should she not want the child, hand it over to a childcare center that will provide it with adoptive parents!"

The students shouted enthusiastically, applauded her, and threw their caps in the air. Annula and Franz sank into a deep silence, heads bowed, while Saltanat and Hun-Sue were hoisted onto their classmates' shoulders.

"I can't believe we beat them," Dorian told me, shaking my hand.

"Why not?" I smiled, watching Tom, Travis, and Jeff arguing.

"Defending abortion is one of progressives' greatest achievements," he answered, smiling. "I wouldn't be surprised if this panel of judges gave the gold medal to the losing side."

Tom stood up and asked the auditorium to calm down.

"Tom is in the headlines!" a voice shouted from outside the hall.

We watched Arkadina walk in with a stack of copies of *Vecherniy Bishkek*, which she immediately distributed among those present.

"And on the front page!" she told us, handing us a copy.

The headline, covering the entire page over Tom's photograph, reproduced the very line I had spoken the night before:

ONLY THE AMERICANS CAN STOP THIS WAR

And in smaller print: *THE BISHKEK AFTERNOON PAPER HELD A TELEPHONE INTERVIEW LAST NIGHT WITH THE BRILLIANT AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF KYRGYZSTAN POLITICAL SCIENTIST, TOM ROBINSON, WHO GAVE US A PRECISE DIAGNOSIS OF POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS TO THE WAR IN IRAQ.*

Looking up, I saw that nearly all my colleagues were watching me, waiting for my reaction. Aside from the students congratulating him and asking questions around the headline, Tom came over to me, fear in his eyes.

"I hope you're not offended," he stammered. "I didn't think that opinion would be the most prominent one in the interview."

"You're the political expert," I told him. "We're waiting for your verdict."

"Oh!" he exclaimed, blushing.

He then made his way to the judges' platform, and, after exchanging a few words with Travis and Jeff, took the microphone. Jeff crossed his arms, watching Annula impatiently.

"The winners are the Defenders of Life!" he exclaimed, prompting general applause.

Arkadina's mouth fell open toward Darixa, expressing her shock.

"How I wish I could have advised you on how to handle your own affairs!" Tom whispered to me, as he hugged me.

"It's a bit late for that now," I nodded.

"I'm very close friends with Arkadina," he excused himself. "You'll understand I couldn't take your side."

"You have no idea what we've been through," I said, with a hint of indignation. "But I promise you, one day I'll write a book about it."

Tom stammered a few unintelligible words, not daring to form a coherent sentence.

"My husband!" Anaïs then leapt into my arms, just as Dorian set off a confetti bomb over the crowd.

Back in Bishkek, my polite manners toward my superiors dissolved; I was fed up with their hypocrisy and indolence. Annula's attempt to crush me intellectually before the SEP community had been a low blow which, though I'd managed to sidestep it, was outrageous, precisely because Annula, as the event's organizer, should have stayed out of it, leaving the intellectual duel strictly between the students.

Now that I had defeated the very person supposed to be SEP's most educated, most capable figure, and the students had given me a standing ovation, I could no longer keep wearing my mask of condescension. For the first time, I embraced my own Santandereano character, that of the *comunero* who has had enough of injustice and abuse, and, without weighing the possible consequences, I

said goodbye to my students and colleagues, ignoring Annula, Darixa, Rachel, and Jeff. Annula, perhaps unsure of my intent, came over and embraced me, and I discreetly pulled away without a word, taking Anaïs's hand and leaving behind what I now considered a defeated, ruined world.

Bishkek, May 2, 2003

Today I handed Ulrika my final course grades; in exchange, she gave me an evaluation she had privately conducted with my students.

"I see I got a good grade," I remarked, with a hint of emotion.

"I've already sent copies to Annula, Darixa, and Jeff," she replied. "I'm certain, if you wish it, they'll reconsider your contract, so you can come back to Central Asia."

"I've heard that line before," I sighed, "only to hear the opposite shortly after. I'm sorry to say it, but I no longer trust them."

"I hope you won't forget us in London," she said, her voice trembling.

"I assure you I won't," I said, ironically.

"You misunderstand me," she replied, her eyes wet. "Your case has raised embarrassing questions for the President and the Rector. I hope that, in the future, whenever you're asked about us, you'll remember that we were a nation that lost everything."

I looked at her, gently.

"Before the Americans opened this university," she went on, "we didn't even have enough to eat. My family had to sell almost everything."

"I've been told that," I nodded. "But no hardship justifies so many attempts on the lives of a pair of honest professors."

"Promise me you won't write about all the trouble you went through with us," she said, "at least not for

another twenty years or so..."

I knew Tom wouldn't keep the secret, I sighed.

"You have my word that I won't."

"Thank you," she said, taking my hands in a gesture of fellowship.

Epilogue

Two years later, on a spring afternoon, I waited for Anaïs at exactly five o'clock beside the Serpentine in Hyde Park. The sun was slowly sinking over the city, gilding the treetops and the Victorian façades that rose in the distance. Runners, families, executives, and tourists strolled along the paths with a carefree ease that still struck me as an extravagant privilege after Central Asia.

In London, we had discovered an unexpected happiness. I worked only three days a week—enough to live comfortably and devote the rest of my time to wandering through museums, visiting libraries, attending concerts, and losing ourselves night after night in the theatres of the West End. After Bishkek, the city felt like an extravagant reward.

I saw Anaïs making her way through the crowd with a smile that was impossible to mistake.

"Askar Akayev has fled the country," she said as soon as she embraced me. "Millions have taken to the streets."

I looked at her silently.

"The first revolution in a post-Soviet country," I said. "At last they've broken their chains."

Anaïs smiled.

"And the first major political downfall in a Muslim country this century."

We began walking as we left the park. Red buses moved slowly along Oxford Street amid black cabs, motorcycles, and crowds pouring out of offices, shops, and cafés. Shop windows were beginning to light up as the sky turned shades of pink above the city.

"The university scandals opened the door to much larger ones," Anaïs said. "First came the allegations of grades being sold, then nepotism, and finally electoral

fraud. By the time Akayev tried to respond, millions were already in the streets.”

I remembered how the mutual accusations between Gulmat and Weiler had filled the national newspapers for months: she accused him of bigamy; he publicly repeated the allegations that had nearly cost me my life.

“José wrote to me a few months ago,” Anaïs continued. “Gulmat was dismissed. Weiler and Tom resigned and ended up teaching in Nigeria.”

I laughed.

“Old imperial administrators transferred from one board to another.”

Anaïs burst into laughter.

“Journalists are still asking George Soros whether his foundation was behind all this.”

“Perhaps they should interview Tom,” I replied. “He'd present all our arguments as though they were his own.”

We crossed Piccadilly Circus amid glowing billboards, packed theatres, and restaurants where the queues stretched onto the pavement. The city seemed to be celebrating something I did not yet understand.

Hand in hand, we finally reached the West End to attend a performance of *Endgame* starring Michael Gambon.

As the lights dimmed and Samuel Beckett's characters contemplated the ruins of their exhausted world, I thought of Bishkek: of those who had remained trapped inside the machinery they had condemned; of those who had migrated from a free world to one of servitude they never dared denounce; and of those who, with fewer resources and greater courage, had challenged it precisely because it was believed to be beyond challenge.

Anaïs rested her head on my shoulder.

I wrapped my arm around her.

Hamm asked whether there was still a single man left in that kingdom of ruins.

Clov replied that there was not.

Proof